CLASSIC POP PRESENTS

SYNTHPOP

40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

FEATURING
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GARY NUMAN
TELEKON
erasure
KRAFTWERK
AUTOBAHN
Depeche Mode
violator
DEAD OR ALIVE
JOHN FOXX
METAMATIC
Yazoo
UPSTAIRS AT ERIC'S
A NEWORDER RELEASE
Republic
& MORALITY
by Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark
ARCHITECTURE
METHODS OF DANCE
OMD SUGAR TAX
ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK
WHO'S AFRAID OF THE ART OF NOISE
THE HUMAN LEAGUE
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AIR
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ROCK · THE ALBUM
KA BAMBAATAA
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SYNTHPOP WELCOME

WHEN THE FIRST WAVE OF CUTTING-EDGE MUSICAL MACHINERY LANDED ON THESE SHORES IT MUST HAVE BEEN UTTERLY MIND-BLOWING FOR ALL CONCERNED. NOT SINCE THE 50S AND THE ARRIVAL OF FENDER'S SPACE-AGE STRATOCASTER HAD THE CREATIVE DIAL BEEN RESET SO COMPLETELY. FROM *DOCTOR WHO*'S SURGING THEME TUNE THROUGH TO KRAFTWERK'S FUTURISTIC AESTHETIC AND ONTO THE DANCEFLOORS OF NEW YORK'S CLUBLAND, TECHNOLOGIES WERE TAKING HOLD THAT CHALLENGED THE VERY DEFINITION OF MUSIC ITSELF. QUITE WHEN THE OSCILLATORS WERE TUNED IN TO POP MUSIC IS UP FOR DEBATE, BUT AS BANDS ACROSS THE GLOBE DOWNED GUITARS AND GRABBED THE NEAREST SYNTH, REVOLUTION WAS MOST CERTAINLY IN THE AIR...

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It all happened backwards for me. By the end of the 80s, I had a catalogue of albums from The Human League, Gary Numan, Heaven 17, Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys, OMD et al, but pretty much knew nothing of where it had all started. I was barely out of nappies when Kraftwerk were coaxing futuristic soundscapes out of their circuitboards. Just shy of two decades later, my ignorance was finally addressed, albeit mostly by accident. The evening I homed in on some slightly off-kilter – contemporary-sounding – electronica coming from a smaller room in the club I was frequenting at the time, is burnt into my memory banks. Rarely does a tune compel me to breach the unwritten rule and approach the DJ booth, but I simply had to know... "Who's this?" I sheepishly asked the hooded figure hunched behind the decks, expecting to be told of some avant-garde outfit, so hip that no-one had heard of them yet. "Kraftwerk," he said with a wry smile. And so began a personal mission to educate myself in the exotic sounds of krautrock, and further afield to YMO, Telex, Sparks, Giorgio Moroder, Space, and on and on.

What I love about the evolution of synth-pop is the fact that the people that drove this sea change in sound, fashion and image were about as far away from the modish movers and shakers that they influenced as was possible to be. People like Bob Moog, the inventor of the game-changing synth that, to this day, remains one of the finest electronic instruments around – and the ultimate signifier of cool; Roger Linn, whose revolutionary drum machine led to rhythmic epiphanies in rehearsal rooms all over the world; and Tom Oberheim, whose technical know-how translated to *Blue Monday*'s iconic pulsing beat.

In this issue, we track the history of the synth-pop revolution. From the pioneers who grew bored of the vulgarities of punk and the escapist climes of prog-rock and set out in search of the future, and on to the present-day sophisticates adding their own fresh thinking. It leaves us wondering where the next wave of innovation will come from. But for now, it's all about the synth....

Rik Flynn *Editor*

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Mark Lindores grew up during the golden age of pop mags devouring *Smash Hits* and *Number One*. Writing for *Classic Pop*, *Total Film* and *Mixmag*, he is living the dream of his 15-year old self. In this issue he addresses the birth of synth-pop.

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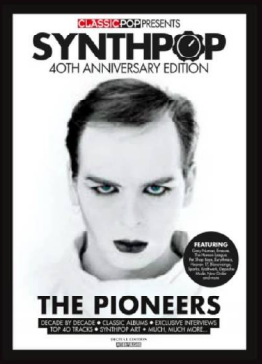

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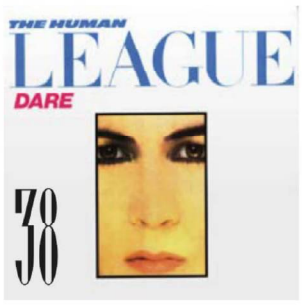

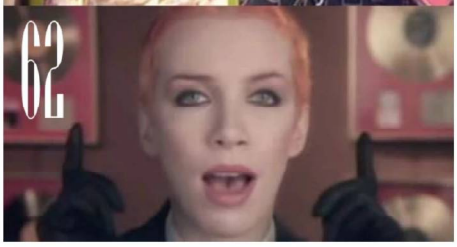

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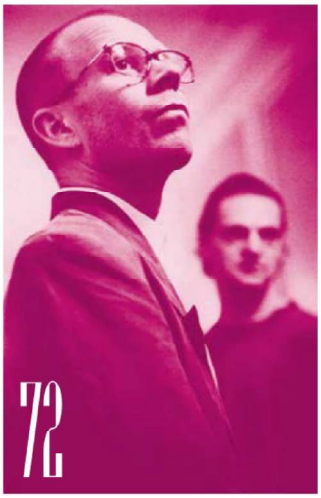

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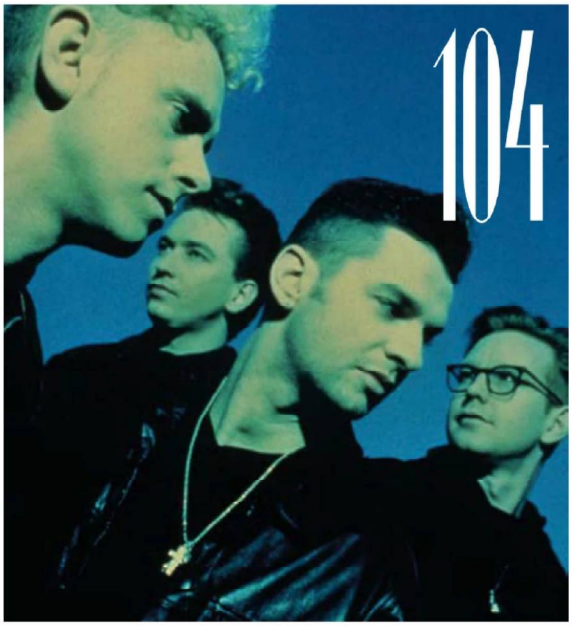

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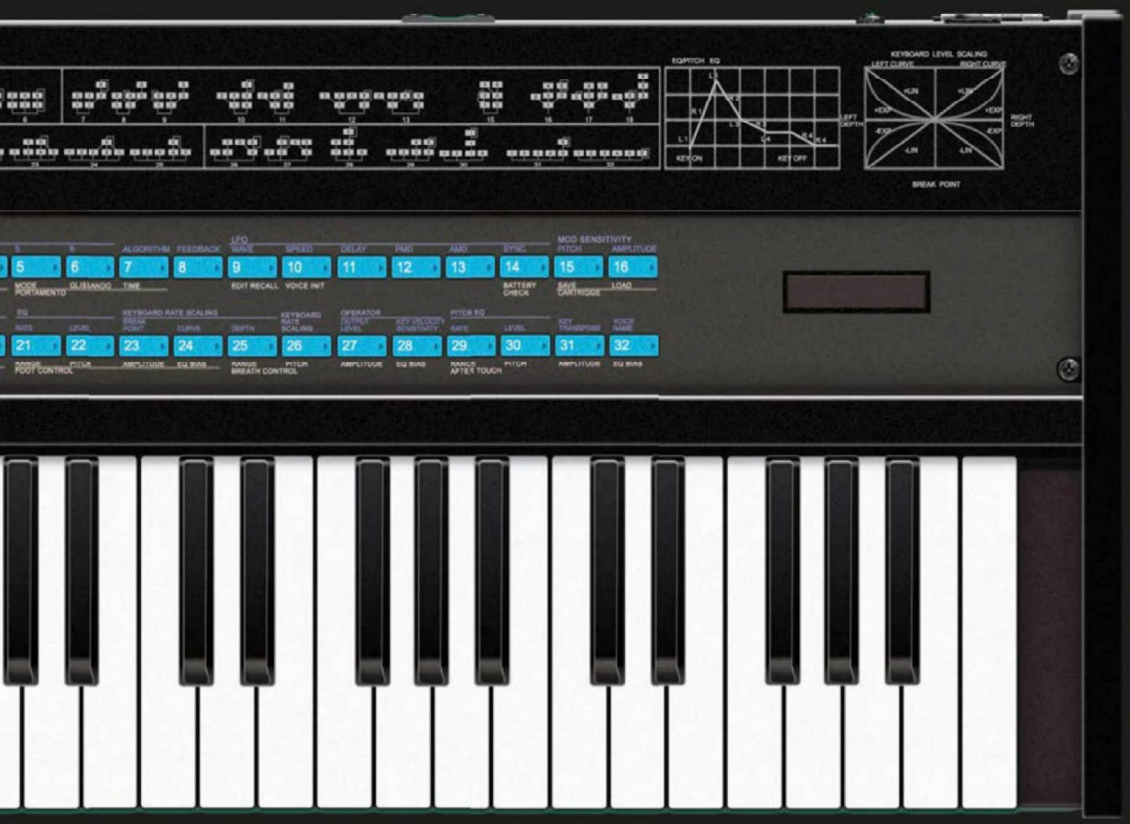
MI
YAMAHA DX7
VOLUME
DATA ENTRY
PITCH
MODULATION
INTERNAL VOICE
INT 1 BRASS 1



These are the dreams that synth-pop was built upon: Rolands, Moogs and Oberheims, Linns, Yamahas and Korgs... passports to a world of possibility, not to mention the chance of stardom and escape. So you didn't have a degree in electronics? No matter: fiddle about, find a sound. Beep!

Visionary American inventor Bob Moog shows off his groundbreaking new Moog synthesiser, the first of its kind in the world

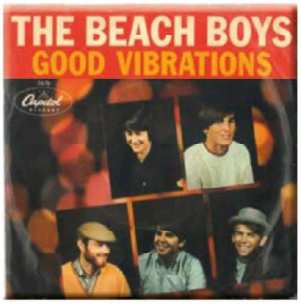
© Getty Images

DAWN OF THE SYNTH

HERALDED AS THE SOUND OF THE FUTURE, ELECTRONIC MUSIC UTILISED INNOVATIVE ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY AND TRANSFORMED MUSIC BEYOND RECOGNITION, CULMINATING IN WHAT WOULD BECOME KNOWN AS SYNTH-POP. MINIMAL, ROBOTIC AND EXHILARATING, IT WAS THE PERFECT FUSION OF MAN AND MACHINE... **MARK LINDORES**

In terms of creating an impact, Kraftwerk's British TV debut as purveyors of "the sound of the future" on *Tomorrow's World*, in which they closely resembled four German accountants banging knitting needles on tea trays, was hardly up there with the shock value of Bowie's *Top Of The Pops* performance of *Starman*, or the Sex Pistols' headline-grabbing interview on Bill Grundy's *Thames Today*, but for a generation of introverts and outsiders that harboured their own dreams of pop stardom, the appearance of the avant-garde Germans offered a ream of possibilities of making those electric dreams come true.

The appearance, on September 25 1975, was a revelation, not only because the UK's exposure to music from mainland Europe at that point was the kitsch novelty hits which appeared in the charts every May as a repercussion of Eurovision, but also because it heralded an entirely new way of creating music which bore no relation to the traditional boys-in-the-band set-up everyone had been used to. Though we are still yet to witness the band's intended plans to eschew instruments altogether and create music entirely from electronic pads and fibres concealed in their clothing, Kraftwerk's *Autobahn* was a teasing glimpse of the future. Soon, inspired by punk's DIY ethos of creating sounds by improvising with random objects (the earliest synths were in a similar price range to a small house), a generation of wannabe musicians was moved to embark on their own sonic journeys.



STRANGE SOUNDS

Though electronic music was still being heralded as the "sound of the future" in 1975, it was already a culmination of 50 years of innovation and advances in technology in which pieces of equipment which had previously been utilised expansively in the fields of aviation and film gradually penetrated music.

Throughout the 50s and 60s, the Ondes Martenot keyboard – actually invented in the 20s – began appearing in opera, classical and French pop music and on tracks by Jacques Brel. In 1962, Joe Meek wrote and produced *Telstar* for The Tornados, which prominently featured the Clavioline, a monophonic oscillator-driven keyboard with assorted presets. Rick Wakeman featured the multi-tape playing Mellotron on the original version of David Bowie's *Space Oddity* in 1969, while the Theremin – heard notably on both the Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations* and Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love* – was an electronic motion detector device invented by Russian inventor Leon Theremin in 1928, which had later been used extensively as the "spooky sound" of a thousand horror and sci-fi films.

It was arguably this inadvertent exposure to these previously unheard sounds via film, TV and radio that had a profound effect on young listeners who grew up to pioneer advances in electronica. One of the most cited introductions to electronic music was the theme tune to *Dr Who*. Composed by Ron Grainer, the music was arranged by Delia Derbyshire of the BBC's onsite Radiophonic Workshop, which created sound effects for TV and radio productions. The sinister-sounding theme, with its pulsing rhythm and eerie, pitchy feedback noise, evoked the terror of the programme's content and was played over the programme's credits for the first 17 series. However, due to the BBC's requirements to keep the identities of the sound engineers working in the Radiophonic workshop secret, Derbyshire was never given the full credit she deserved (even Ron Grainer wanted to credit her as a co-writer due to the input she had in realising his composition as the theme), and she remains a largely unsung heroine of electronic music.

With the creation of synthesisers such as the EMS VCS3 in 1969 (commonly known as the Putney after its place of invention), which not only had its own

THE PLAYERS

FIVE KEY ARTISTS WHO SHAPED THE EARLY SYNTH SOUNDSCAPE...

STEVIE WONDER

Multi-talented 'Little' Stevie Wonder marked his 21st birthday by dropping the 'Little' and renegotiating his contract with Motown, his main proviso being that he have full artistic control. The early 70s saw him release a string of ambitious albums, including *Music Of My Mind*, *Talking Book* and *Innervisions*, on which he, along with producers Robert Margouleff and Malcolm Cecil and the pair's massive synthesiser, TONTO (The Original New Timbral Orchestra), expanded the boundaries of pop and R&B.

KRAFTWERK

Ralf Hutter and Florian Schneider met in the late 60s, and by 1972 they had created the four-member Kraftwerk, embracing synths, drum machines and vocoders and improvising sounds by using random objects. On the albums *Autobahn*, *Trans-Europe Express* and *The Man-Machine* they teamed sparse arrangements and pop melodies with a carefully co-ordinated visual identity which amounted to their self-described "robot pop".

GIORGIO MORODER

Moroder began releasing music as 'Giorgio' in 1963, with minor acclaim, before moving to Munich in 1968 to work as a record producer. His first major success was with Chicory Tip's *Son Of My Father* in 1972, but *I Feel Love* with Donna Summer in 1977 changed Moroder's career – and the face of modern music. As well as writing and producing for other artists, he released music under the name of Munich Machine before scoring films such as *American Gigolo*, *Foxes* and *Midnight Express*. The latter earned him his first Oscar in 1979.

DAVID BOWIE

After a decade of unbridled success and hedonism, Bowie moved to West Berlin in 1976 to give up drugs and begin work on a new album. With Brian Eno and Tony Visconti he produced the 'Berlin Trilogy' of *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger*, inspired by Kraftwerk and Neu!, moving beyond classic rock into a more abstract, experimental sound with sporadic lyrics. Though met with mixed reviews, the work produced during his Berlin period has since been lauded as his bravest and most interesting.

GARY NUMAN

Ex-punk Numan discovered synthesisers in the studio just as he was about to begin recording his debut album. Surprised and transfixed by their power and scope, Numan completely changed his musical identity, shifting his focus to electronic music. Inspired by Kraftwerk and Bowie, Numan, along with Tubeway Army, became synthpop's first crossover successes, topping the charts with *Are Friends Electric?* and *Cars* – though his lavish stage shows meant his first major tours lost money.

© Getty Images

sound but could have instruments played through it which it was able to manipulate and alter, electronics became much more commonplace.

As well as rock bands such as the aforementioned Led Zeppelin and The Who, it was utilised by everyone from prog-rockers to soul-boys. The VCS3 was used throughout Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* and was one of the first to be used by avid synth enthusiast Stevie Wonder. Wonder had been introduced to producers Malcolm Cecil and Robert Margouleff, who were using an innovative way of working with a bank of synthesisers from Oberheim, Moog, ARP and the EMS to create TONTO – their own synth orchestra. The idea captivated Stevie's attention and became the impetus of an incredible run of records in the early 70s which still ranks as his most creative period. "Stevie was apparently quite taken by the idea that this was a keyboard instrument that he could possibly play that made all of these sounds," Malcolm told the BBC. "He was tired of having to play his songs to an arranger who would then go away and write the arrangement, record the track with the band, call Stevie in after it was recorded, tell him where he had to sing, what he had to sing, and then send him away again while they did the mix. And Stevie said it sounded nothing like what the song sounded like in his head."

THE POST-PUNK PATH

While electronica was featuring more and more in modern pop, rock and soul music, it was the release of Wendy Carlos' soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's ultra-violent masterpiece *A Clockwork Orange* and Kraftwerk's *Autobahn*, which were created almost entirely using synthesisers (*Autobahn* was almost exclusively electronic but did also feature guitar and violin), which proved majorly influential on a generation of alienated synthesists.

> "WE LOVED THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF PUNK, BUT WE FOUND THE ACTUAL MUSIC VERY ONE-TRICK-PONY. WHAT WE DID WAS TO TAKE THE ATTITUDE OF PUNK, AND GAVE IT A DIFFERENT CONTEXT"

"We loved the whole infrastructure of punk, but didn't like the actual music as we found it very one-trick-pony," says Martyn Ware, founder of The Human League and Heaven 17. "So what we did was to take the attitude of punk, and gave it a different context – let's make music that no-one has heard before."

With the attitude of punk and the music of Kraftwerk as a starting point, Ware was one of many who took advantage of the technological advances

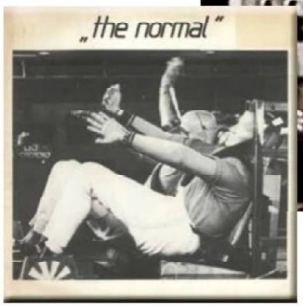
© Getty Images

A photograph of Wendy Carlos, composer, musician, physicist, and all-round genius, with the Moog synthesiser. Her 1968 album *Switched-On Bach* went platinum in the US, won three Grammys and propelled the synthesiser out of the lab and into the living room

"EVERYONE SAID WE WERE INFLUENCED BY KRAFTWERK, BUT IT WAS MORE GIORGIO MORODER. *I FEEL LOVE* WAS LIKE NOTHING WE'D HEARD BEFORE – IT WAS HYPNOTIC, IT WAS DRIVING"

of the late 70s which saw synthesisers, including the Minimoog and the Mini Korg 700S, become affordable for the first time to those that didn't have access to the state-of-the-art studios. Taking advantage of the latest developments, bedroom musicians all over the country were forming bands – or, as the synths enabled them to play multiple roles simultaneously, went it alone.

Daniel Miller bought his first synthesiser in 1977 after reading JG Ballard's novel *Crash* and, seduced by the idea that the book felt it was "five minutes into the future", decided his music should reflect that notion. Recording under the name The Normal, Miller recorded two tracks inspired by *Crash*, *T.V.O.D* and *Warm Leatherette*, and founded his own record label Mute to distribute the double A-sided single through Rough Trade record shops. With its punky aesthetic, stark sound and dark lyrics, Miller's work personified a boundary-pushing underground scene which included industrial experimentalists Throbbing Gristle and a post-Ultravox John Foxx.



Elsewhere, the electronic wave was pulsing through Britain. In Liverpool, Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark had been inspired by Kraftwerk and had even managed to take advantage of a half-empty concert hall (the result of the gig being held the same night as Liverpool royalty Paul McCartney played a homecoming concert in the city with Wings) to meet their idols backstage and tell them what an influence they'd had, while in Manchester, Joy Division were fusing synths with their gloomy guitar rock.

STIRRINGS IN STEEL TOWN

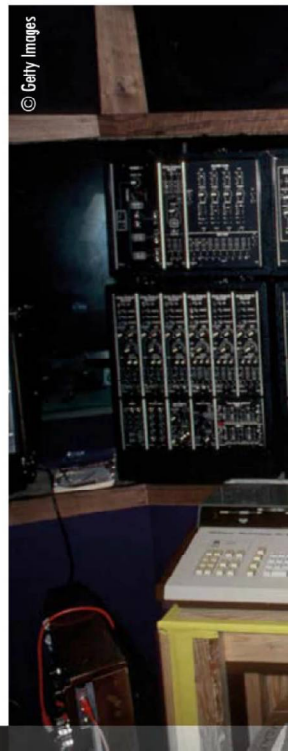
Meanwhile, in Sheffield – a city going through a major economic crisis due to the decline of its once thriving industry – deserted factories, offices and warehouses were being utilised as rehearsal spaces by a number of artists. Soon, the Meat Whistle Arts Centre, a council-funded venture, became the launchpad for countless groups including Cabaret Voltaire, Clock DVA and the most successful of all the Sheffield bands, The Human League.

Philip Oakey of synth-pop pioneers The Human League on stage in Sheffield in 1980

© Getty Images

Computer operators Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh had already been the core members of a succession of local bands such as The Dead Daughters and The Future before changing their name to the Human League and inviting hospital porter and local scenester Phil Oakey to join the group on the basis that "he already looked like a popstar".

The band's first single *Being Boiled* was a cult underground hit and landed them a support slot on tour with Siouxsie and the Banshees. When the tour played London, David Bowie was in the audience and declared the Human League "the future of pop music". With their irresistibly catchy melodies juxtaposed against cold, emotionless, synth-laden soundscapes, the group's sound may have sounded indebted to Kraftwerk, but frontman Phil Oakey maintains that it was the music of an Italian working in Germany that was the catalyst for the group.



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ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

MOVING FROM HUGE (AND EXPENSIVE) TO TINY (AND AFFORDABLE), SYNTHS SHAPED 70S MUSIC

STEVIE WONDER

INNERVISIONS (1973)

This was Stevie's third album with producers Robert Margouleff and Malcolm Cecil, and the moment on which they perfected the sound they were working towards with the TONTO synthesiser. Such was the chemistry in the studio by this point, they felt comfortable enough to use unorthodox methods to get the best possible vocal from Stevie – such as deliberately making him angry to ensure his voice was hoarse to match the grit of the social commentary of tracks such as *Living For The City*. That song, along with *Higher Ground* and *Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing*, were proof that Wonder, Margouleff and Cecil had perfected funky, synth-drenched soul.

KRAFTWERK

TRANS-EUROPE EXPRESS (1977)

Though *Autobahn* had given Kraftwerk its breakthrough and established them as pioneers, *Trans-Europe Express* expanded on its ideas, resulting in the group's most accessible record. A duality runs through the album, splitting it into two halves thematically – the first exploring the juxtaposition of image and reality, the second revelling in the glorification of Europe. *Trans-Europe Express'* real strength is the advance in musicality from *Autobahn*, fusing catchier melodies with minimalism and danceable mechanised rhythms… something they'd explore even further on next album *The Man Machine*.

DAVID BOWIE

LOW (1977)

Having landed in Berlin eager to start afresh, Bowie teamed with Brian Eno and Tony Visconti and flung himself into maybe his strangest direction yet: *Low*. Having already taken his fans on a journey which had embraced folk, rock and Philly soul, *Low* was undoubtedly his most avant-garde record to date. A tribute to European art rock, the release was divided into two parts, one vocal and one instrumental. While the first half with its quirky-yet-accessible alternative pop songs was immediately well received, the second half's eerie, moody and haunting instrumentals conveyed his feelings of loneliness, sadness and despair, and initially polarised listeners.

THE HUMAN LEAGUE

REPRODUCTION (1979)

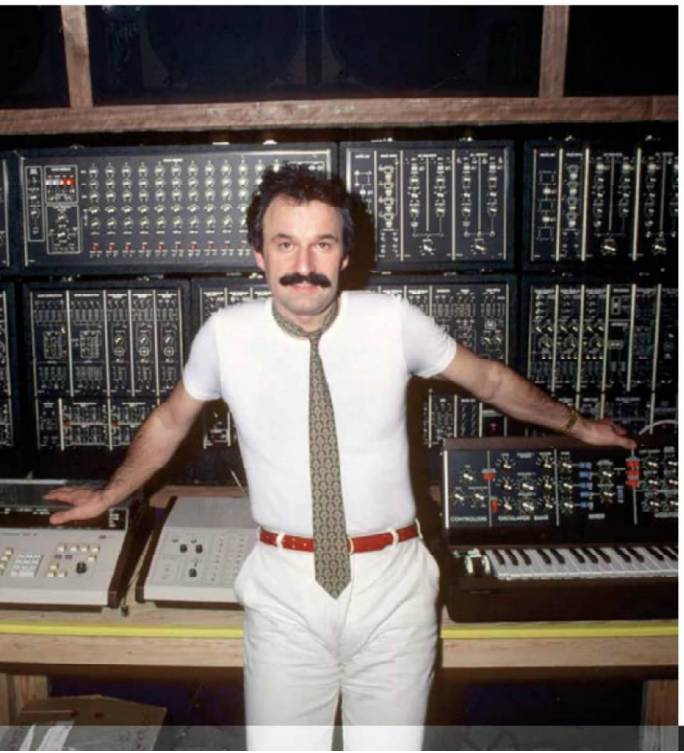
Although The Human League claimed to have been more influenced by Giorgio Moroder than Kraftwerk and only harboured desires to be a pop group, the debut album from original line-up of Phil Oakey, Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh was an arty, gloom-laden collection far removed from the pristine pop the band would later be renowned for. Produced by Colin Thurston, then best known for his work with Bowie and Iggy Pop, these industrial post-punk soundscapes perfectly capture the cold, emotionless sound of synth-pop. The album is also notable for its problematic cover image which, on first look, shows people dancing on naked babies.

GARY NUMAN

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE (1979)

Best known for spawning Numan's monster hit *Cars*, *The Pleasure Principle* contains plenty of other highlights, including *Metal, Films, Complex* and *Conversation*. The music was fleshed out by the addition of Cedric Sharpley and Paul Gardiner, whose drums and bass are a vital addition to the icy synths.

Obviously inspired more by Bowie than Kraftwerk, Numan was also taking cues image-wise from his heroes. Adopting a robotic look which nodded towards both artists, Numan played elaborately-staged gigs and had an image to match his music. By the end of 1979 he had become synth-pop's very own starman.



***Above;* Donna Summer and Giorgio Moroder's influential *I Feel Love* single**

Left;* Moroder transformed the dancefloor not only with *I Feel Love* but also with his 1977 disco album *From Here To Eternity

"Everyone said that we sounded like Kraftwerk, but that was because we used the same instruments so some of the sounds were similar," he says. "We were always more influenced by Giorgio Moroder than we were by Kraftwerk. As soon as we heard *I Feel Love* on the radio, it was like nothing we'd ever heard before. It was hypnotic, it was driving and you couldn't quite believe what you were hearing."

And what of Giorgio Moroder himself? "I was trying to create the sound of the future," recalls the producer/composer. "I'd already had a hit with a song called *Son Of My Father* [with Chicory Tip] which was the first pop song to use the Moog. I used it a lot from then and came up with the idea of using a synthesiser for everything – the bass, the kick, the snare, the hi-hat, the percussion. That was the sound which drove the song. Then, of course, with the voice of Donna sounding really sensual and the contrast of her melodic singing over the hard-

CULTURED CLUBBERS

IN 1979/80, A TINY CLIQUE OF FASHIONISTAS REQUIRED A SOUNDTRACK NOUVEAU – AND ROXY, BOWIE AND KRAFTWERK WERE SOON JOINED BY THE BLITZ KIDS THEMSELVES

As Studio 54 heralded the era of the superclub in 1970s New York, an exciting new scene resonated throughout London as a conglomerate of creatives transformed the dingiest dives into hedonistic havens that would form a nocturnal playground which provided solace to fashion freaks, club kids and superstars-in-waiting.

By the time the 1980s dawned, London's club scene was the definition of cool with Steve Strange's infamous Blitz club at its epicentre. Beginning life as Bowie night at Billy's on 69 Dean Street, they moved it to the vacant Tuesday night spot at the Blitz wine bar and created a phenomenon. The birthplace of the New Romantics, Blitz ran for just 18 months but its influence was – and is – far reaching.

The criteria for entry was the way you looked, with individuality and outrageousness encouraged by Steve Strange's brutal door policy. Scores of sexually ambiguous clubbers queued round the block, and selection would be determined by Steve holding up a mirror to those desperate for approval and asking "Would *you* let you in?"

Once inside, the Blitz Kids preened and posed to a throbbing electro soundtrack of Kraftwerk, The Human League, Gary Numan and OMD, courtesy of DJ Rusty Egan. "I'd find European versions of records such as Kraftwerk's *Das Model* and *Les Mannequins*, and Bowie's *Heroes* in German and French," says Rusty. "I felt Europe had better music to offer than the American music dominating the charts and TV. It was more stylish, decadent and futuristic."

Among the famous faces to emerge from the Blitz were house band Spandau Ballet, former cloakroom attendant Boy George, Marilyn, Sigue Sigue Sputnik's Martin Degville, and Steve Strange himself – who was the first Blitz kid to hit the charts with Visage's seminal *Fade To Grey*.

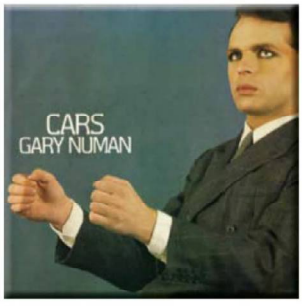
The Blitz Club in Covent Garden

© Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo

"The Blitz was a coming together of people who were involved in many other creative scenes," says DJ, writer and clubland icon Princess Julia. "Perhaps this is why the energy of a small group of people created such a legacy."

edge of the mechanical sounds, I think that's why *I Feel Love* worked so well."

With Donna Summer's *I Feel Love* topping the charts in the UK and across Europe in 1977, the era of electronica had truly arrived, crossing over from underground anomaly to mainstream success, transforming the face of music and opening the door to a world of more pristine, programmed pop. As bands such as The Human League and OMD vied to be the next to achieve crossover success, performing sessions for John Peel and travelling the length and breadth of the country gigging in bars and student unions, synth-pop's posterboy arrived – not from any scene, but seemingly out of nowhere.

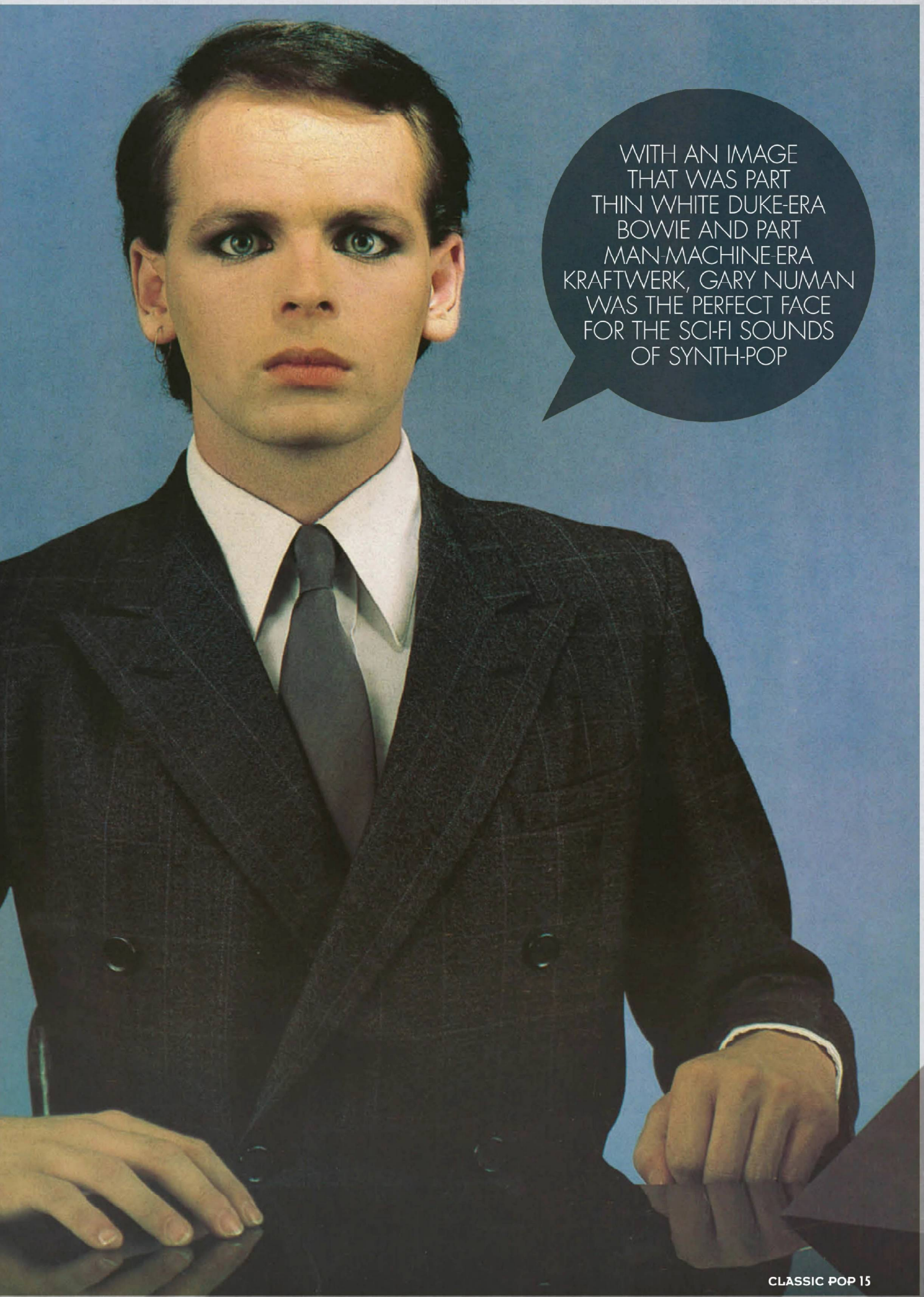


The seemingly overnight success of Tubeway Army's *Are Friends Electric?* in May 1979 took not only the public by surprise, but also the peers of frontman Gary Numan – many of whom (much) later admitted to be seething with jealousy, feeling he had stolen their thunder. The fact that he had been a late devotee to electronic music only compounded their fury.

Having been in various punk bands and released a couple of unsuccessful singles as well as a limited pressing of their debut album, Tubeway Army's sound and aesthetic were instantly transformed after Numan found a Minimoog in a recording studio. Captivated by its sounds and capabilities, he swiftly rearranged all of the guitar-based songs he had written and recorded the album using the synthesiser – to his label's anger. They were wrong: with an image that was part Thin White Duke-era Bowie and part *Man-Machine*-era Kraftwerk, Numan was the perfect face for the synthetic sci-fi sounds of synthpop.

With follow-up single *Cars* (credited to Numan as opposed to Tubeway Army) following *Are Friends Electric?* to No.1, Gary Numan's success was solidified. Cool enough to be booked for slots on both *The Old Grey Whistle Test* and *Top Of The Pops*, he was propelled to a level of fame he neither expected, nor coveted.

As electronic music had been constantly been heralded as the sound of the future, the death of disco and implosion of punk had ensured the new decade began in resplendent fashion. As the preening poseurs of London's club scene who'd adopted the cool sounds of synthpop as their soundtrack made their way into the pages of the *NME* and *Melody Maker*, the stage was set for the grand entrance of the 80s and the New Romantics. ■


WITH AN IMAGE THAT WAS PART THIN WHITE DUKE-ERA BOWIE AND PART MAN-MACHINE-ERA KRAFTWERK, GARY NUMAN WAS THE PERFECT FACE FOR THE SCI-FI SOUNDS OF SYNTH-POP

CLASSIC ALBUM

AUTOBAHN

KRAFTWERK

EMOTIONLESS? REPETITIVE? *AUTOBAHN* WAS ANYTHING BUT: THE ALBUM THAT ALIENATED THE CRITICS IN 1974 WAS AN ARTISTICALLY TRIUMPHANT BLEND OF HEART AND TECHNOLOGY, A TRULY PIONEERING WORK THAT INFORMED THE NEXT QUARTER-CENTURY AND BECAME A CORNERSTONE OF A NEW MUSICAL MOVEMENT...

NEIL CROSSLEY

Formed in Düsseldorf by Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider in 1970, Kraftwerk's name translates to 'power plant' in English

Anyone surveying great moments of artistic innovation over the centuries will note that the more innovative the art, the more vociferous the response to it. As Berlin theatre director Claus Peymann said in 2017: "Art is always resistance, contradiction... and the moment in which that no longer occurs, art runs dry."

Such was the case with Peymann's fellow countrymen, Kraftwerk, when the electronica pioneers released their career-defining fourth album, *Autobahn*, in 1974. When the band embarked on a UK tour the following year, they played to half-filled halls, and critics seemed underwhelmed. "Spineless, emotionless sound with no variety, less taste," railed Keith Ging in *Melody Maker*, adding: "For God's sake, keep the robots out of music." Four decades on, *Autobahn* is hailed as a masterpiece, transformative and unique, a hypnotic and insistent electronic pulse populated by shimmering keyboards, rhythm loops and trance-like guitars.

At the heart of the band was the relationship between humans and technology. The sound was sparse, linear and rhythmic, but beneath the machine-like ethos breathed elegant and enticing melody. As Neil McCormick wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2014, Kraftwerk's sound implied "an almost mystical reverence for the ordinary objects of an industrial world". Creatively, too, Kraftwerk and *Autobahn* cast a long shadow. Bowie adored the band, and they were a significant influence on his *Low* and *"Heroes"* albums. *Autobahn* spawned a generation of synthesiser minimalists, a veritable who's who of synth-pop artists such as The Human League, Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys and Ultravox.

Kraftwerk's first three albums were groundbreaking in their own right, but *Autobahn* was the first to fully embrace the repetitive electronic sound that would become their trademark. Visually, too, their influence was significant. In an age of long hair and loons, Kraftwerk's short hair and sober business suits gave them the look of hip accountants, as the four-piece stood immobile at their technology stations.

"We offered self-confidence," explained former Kraftwerk percussionist Wolfgang Flür. "We wanted to show our German appearance with cropped hair, ironed suits and ties, not to imitate English pop or American rock. We knew our appearance was ironic, flirtatious, provocative."

The minimalist artistic concepts of their albums would go on to become design classics. Sonically and aesthetically, Kraftwerk's legacy was profound.

While Kraftwerk's sound evokes the epic starkness of the pre-Glasnost East, it was Düsseldorf – a city closer to France and Belgium and in the industrial heartland of the Ruhr valley – where the band were formed. It was here, in 1968, that Ralf Hütter (organ, synthesisers) and Florian Schneider (flutes, synthesisers, violin) met as students at the Robert Schumann University Of Music And Media. They initially performed in a progressive free-form quintet called Organisation, releasing the album *Tone Float* (1969), before splitting. The duo immersed themselves in Germany's experimental art-rock underground, occupying the same creative terrain as Can and Neu!, a cluster of avant-garde artists dubbed disparagingly

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 1 November 1974

LABEL Philips, Vertigo

PRODUCED BY
Ralf Hütter, Florian Schneider

ENGINEERS
Fritz Hilpert, Henning Schmitz

RECORDED AT
Conny Plank's, Cologne, Germany

PERSONNEL
Ralf Hütter – vocals, electronics; Florian Schneider – vocals, electronics; Klaus Röder – violin, guitar; Wolfgang Flür – percussion; Konrad "Conny" Plank – sound engineer; Emil Schult – cover painting; Barbara Niemöller – back cover photo

TRACK BY TRACK

1 AUTOBAHN

The slamming of a car door and the throaty whirr of a starter motor introduce this iconic 22.43-minute track, which takes up Side 1 of the album. The track evokes journeying through the landscape, the high-speed concentration of the fast lane, tuning the car radio and the monotony of a long trip. It describes the A555 from Cologne to Bonn, the first Autobahn. "It's a road where we were travelling all the time," explained Ralf Hütter. "Hundreds of thousands of kilometres from university to art galleries, from clubs to home. We didn't even have money to stay in hotels, so at night, we'd be travelling home after playing somewhere."

A vocoder is used to process some of the vocals. The classic Moog bass sound is utilised for the bassline, playing an octave riff with additional analogue echo. Chords are played on synths, which feature phasing. Wolfgang Flür plays electronic percussion pads, while the so-called 'motorik' drum beat is used for the song's final section.

Plank and Kraftwerk created *Autobahn* from numerous audio sources, field recordings and primitive samples. Hütter's Minimoog was used extensively, while other instruments included an EMS Synthi and an ARP Odyssey. The rasping, malevolent-sounding vocal chants were produced from a Robovox, a speech synthesiser built by Schneider. Tape-reversed bursts of white noise were used to suggest passing vehicles on this epic, artificial road trip.

"The white stripes on the road, I noticed them driving home every day from the studio," Hütter told Stephen Dalton in *Uncut* magazine in 2016. "Then the car sounds, the radio – it's like a loop, a continuum, part of the endless music of Kraftwerk. In *Autobahn*, we put car sounds, horn, basic melodies and tuning motors. Adjusting the suspension and tyre pressure, rolling on the asphalt, that gliding sound – pffft pffft – when the wheels go on to those painted stripes. It's sound poetry."

Gracing this synthscape was a simple, spare lyric, composed by Emil Schult. The seven-line nursery rhyme details the grey tarmac of the road, the sun-drenched valley, the green-bordered white stripes and the sounds of the car radio, which plays the song back to itself: "Wir fahren fahren fahren auf der Autobahn" ("We drive, drive, drive on the motorway").

This chorus is frequently mistaken for the English phrase "Fun fun fun on the Autobahn" and is believed to refer to the 1964 Beach Boys song *Fun, Fun, Fun*. But Ralf Hütter refuted such claims. "In the case of The Beach Boys, *Fun Fun Fun* is about a T-Bird," Hütter explained in *Uncut*. "But ours is about a Volkswagen or Mercedes. The quote is really more ethnic. People said: 'Are you doing surfing on the Rhine?' Yes, maybe, but we don't have waves. It's like an artificial joke. But no, it's not a Beach Boys record, it's a Kraftwerk record."

2 KOMETENMELODIE 1

Both versions of *Kometenmelodie* (*Comet Melody*) were inspired by the Kohoutek comet, which passed close to Earth in 1973. This first part has none of the pop sensibilities of the *Autobahn* track; it is a ponderous, yet entrancing, piece of space-inspired electronica. The eerie whispers and bleeps evoke the vast emptiness of space, while the emergence of a gentle piano motif at 3:09 introduces warmth and a hint of humanity. By 4:25, the piano has gone, and the thick monophonic squelch of an analogue synth comes to the fore while a sparse, distant rhythm prevails. As one critic put it: "Music to watch planets rotate to".

3 KOMETENMELODIE 2

In contrast to *Kometenmelodie 1*, the second part embraces a structure and melody more akin to the title track of the album. It was released both as a B-side to the *Autobahn* single and as an A-side follow-up single in its own right. There's a sweeping majesty to the melody here that highlights the band's pop sensibilities. Central to the track is a circular string synth riff that enters at 0:30 and elevates the piece, giving it momentum and intent. By 1:30, a jarringly rock'n'roll-style synth lends the track an almost jaunty feel, while adding momentum. At 4:15, the circular riff re-enters, re-establishing the epic, magisterial feel. It's easy to hear how it fuelled the likes of Ultravox and OMD.

4 MITTERNACHT

The sombre feel of this track seems at odds with the prevailing mood of the album, but lends it an ominous beauty. A haunting, ecclesiastical organ drone introduces the composition, before sparse, densely echoed metallic clangs and water-like drips blend with ethereal, whale-music sounds. At 1:22, a strident five-note motif – G-F-C-D#-D – is introduced. The effect is both beguiling and claustrophobic. By 3:00, it is left to the percussive sounds to outro the track, and these are impeccably placed.

5 MORGENSPAZIERGANG

Hütter's Minimoog features prominently at the start of this final track on the album. Arguably one of the most natural songs the band ever made, it belies their reputation for producing pure electronica. *Morgenspaziergang* (*Morning Walk*) also showcases the diversity of the album, delineating the track from the rest of the release and concluding the album on a high point. The ending reintroduces a musical motif first heard in the instrumental section of *Autobahn*; a potent end to a peerless album.

"All the tracks are like film loops, short films," recalled Hütter, years later. "*Morgenspaziergang* is what we wrote when we came out of the studio. We were always working at night; then in the morning, everything seems fresh and our ears are open again. Everything silent."

© Getty Images

as 'krautrock' by the UK press. "We were mostly like the art-scene band, always on the same bill as Can," Hütter told *Uncut* in 2016. "We had jazz drummers, rock drummers, and I had my little drum machine... we didn't have Kraftwerk, we didn't have robots, we didn't have *The Man-Machine* album, nothing. But the concepts were there."

By 1970, the pair were becoming obsessed with synthesisers. In that same year, they saw Gilbert & George in the city's Kunsthalle, the suit-and-tie-clad British artists claiming to bring art into everyday life. This same manifesto fuelled Hütter and Schneider when in 1970 they formed Kraftwerk, a name that translates as 'power plant' in English. They rented an empty workshop at Mintropstrasse 16, in an industrial area of Düsseldorf. This space, which they called Kling-Klang Studio, became the epicentre of their development.

The band began spending eight to 10 hours a day there, regarding themselves as 'musical workers' and becoming notoriously secretive. That same year, they embarked on a working relationship with a figure they had first encountered while working with Organisation: producer, engineer and musician Konrad 'Conny' Plank. An ardent believer in the possibilities of electronic music, Plank was a master at creating startling electronic soundscapes and blending them with conventional sounds. For Hütter and Schneider, the

The title track of *Autobahn*, which runs the entire length of Side 1 of the album, traces the journey along the A555 from Cologne to Bonn

alliance was like sonic gold dust, and Plank's expertise and influence were hugely significant. He would go on to co-produce and engineer their first four albums, starting in 1970 with their eponymous debut, on which they used two drummers – Andreas Hohmann and Klaus Dinger – for a distinct rock edge.

In 1972, they released *Kraftwerk 2*, another instrumental record with a sleeve bearing a strong conceptual edge, echoing pop artists such as Warhol in its use of a dynamic traffic-cone motif on the cover. Kraftwerk undertook live shows as a duo in Germany and France, using a beatbox-type drum machine, with preset rhythms taken from an electronic organ. The response was lukewarm. "We did all kinds of strange things... feedbacks and overtones and sounds and rhythms," Hütter told *Select* in 1991. "No drummer wanted to work with us, because we had these electronic gadgets."

Kraftwerk's vision started to take shape in 1973. Hütter bought a Minimoog synth, a rare luxury at the time, remarking later that the instrument cost him as much as his VW Beetle. That same year, they released their third album *Ralf Und Florian*, which laid the groundwork for the programmed beats and polished synthesised melodies that were to follow. While almost entirely instrumental, the album marks the band's first use of the vocoder, which would become one of their signatures. Kraftwerk's futuristic and robotic sound was also influenced by the 'adrenalised insurgency' of Detroit artists such as MC5 and The Stooges.

"We listened to quite a lot of electronic stuff," Hütter told *Uncut*. "We were brought up within the kind of classical Beethoven school of music, but we were aware of a contemporary scene. But where was our music? Finding our voice, that was the use of the tape recorder. It made us use synthetic voices, artificial personalities, all those robotic ideas."

In 1974, Hütter and Schneider recruited two new members from the Düsseldorf art-rock scene: Klaus Röder on violin and guitar and Wolfgang Flür on drums. Röder lasted only a few months, but Flür was a perfect fit, his delicate style melding perfectly with the band's minimalist and mechanised sound. As Hütter proudly told the press: "Our drummers don't sweat."

Kraftwerk also underwent some radical rebranding. They cut their long hair and started wearing smart business suits – echoes of Gilbert & George – exhibiting in the process a contrived blend of wry humour and serious artistic intent.

Flür moved into the apartment owned by Hütter's artist friend Emil Schult, a former guitarist with the band, who had become their visual advisor and sleeve designer. According to Flür, there were long discussions about the shape and direction of the band, with "technique and romance" being heralded as their new motto.

"Ralf had a kind of German idea in mind," recalled Flür to *Uncut*. "Germany also needed something like The Beach Boys. Something with self-understanding and immaculate presence, after the ugly wars that our parents had inflicted on the world. Something positive and youthful, that freed us from the stench of the past."

Despite their merits, Kraftwerk's first three albums were essentially free-form experimental rock, without the pop hooks or song structure of later work. That all changed with *Autobahn* in 1974. In the summer of that year, Hütter, Schneider, Flür and Röder decamped from Düsseldorf to Conny Plank's newly-established farmhouse studio in Wolperath. Much of the recording of the new album was undertaken there, although in the pre-production stage, Plank would drive his 16-track mobile-recording truck to Kraftwerk's fabled Kling-Klang headquarters in Düsseldorf, park in the yard outside and run wires from his mixing desk in the truck into the building.

Kraftwerk and Plank worked intensely, making extensive use of Hutter's new Minimoog plus an EMS Synthi, an ARP Odyssey and other early synthesisers. But the album wasn't all electronic – violin, flute, piano and guitar also featured.

The pastoral *Morgenspaziergang* (*Morning Walk*) is one of four sublime pieces of ambient electro-acoustic instrumental music which make up Side 2, with two versions of *Kometenmelodie* (*Comet Melody*) joined by *Mitternacht* (*Midnight*), an ominous and epic slice of 'electronic volksmusic'.

But it is the title track – which, at 22:43, runs the length of Side 1 – that marks the band's definitive separation from their peers. This mesmerising track evokes the feeling of travelling through the landscape from Cologne to Bonn. Here, the band's electric pulse comes into its own: an insistent, propulsive force that renders the rhythms and motifs of the shimmering keyboards and guitars hypnotic. Gracing this synthscape was a simple, sparse lyric, composed by Emil Schult.

> "Germany needed something like The Beach Boys. Something with self-understanding and immaculate presence, after the ugly wars that our parents had inflicted on the world"
>
> **WOLFGANG FLÜR**

All great bands have a tipping point where drive, timing, creativity and clarity of vision converge into a glorious whole, and for Kraftwerk, this was such a moment. Gone was the experimental krautrock. Instead, what emerged was a concise, pristine, beautifully realised vision, with electronic instruments firmly to the fore.

Autobahn was released on Philips/Vertigo on 1 November 1974 and took off in the US and UK. In 1975, an edited version of the title track scaled the singles charts, reaching No.11 in the UK charts and No.25 in the US.

Over four decades on, the album and the band sound as vital as ever. Hütter is the sole remaining original member, but Kraftwerk's influence and critical currency remains undiminished by the passing of time. In 2009, Kraftwerk released a remastered version of the *Autobahn* album, prompting critics to reassess its merits. Writer Chris Power of *Drowned In Sound* still found its impact profound. "The journey that the album describes, its junctions and turnings spreading onward and outward throughout the next quarter-century of popular music, is one that's still clearly visible in the rear-view mirror," he wrote. Stephen Dalton, writing in *1001 Albums To Hear Before You Die* in 2016, was equally effusive: "*Autobahn*," he concluded, "is cinema for the ears."

GODFATHERS of POP

KARL BARTOS

A member of the hugely influential Kraftwerk during their pomp years, Karl Bartos released his second solo album, *Off The Record*, in 2013, featuring Johnny Marr and Bernard Sumner. 2016 also saw the re-release of his 2003 debut solo album *Communication*. We catch up with him as he casts an eye over 40 years spent making electronic music…

What were you doing before joining Kraftwerk?
I was playing in the opera, the Deutsche Oper am Rhein, on percussion. Then I met Alfred Alings, who played percussion on a famous composition by Karlheinz Stockhausen called *Kontakte*. That was involved with electroacoustics, an early electronic movement that Stockhausen was pioneering. He spoke about making a whole universe with compositions existing only out of electronic sources. And then, in his most famous composition, *Gesang Der Jünglinge*, he combined the movement of music concrète with electronic music, and this was the constitution of electro pop.

When did you first get hold of electronic instruments?
In the summer of 1974. I got a phone call from Florian Schneider asking if I wanted to join Kraftwerk to play some gigs because he'd just come out with this song about automobiles. I went into the studio and there was a Hammond and a Farfisa, and Florian was playing flute. They sounded like Pink Floyd with tape delay echoes going on all the time. So this was the early sound of Kraftwerk. Then they bought a Minimoog, which was actually played on a record called *Ralf And Florian* in 1973. Pink Floyd had a Moog in 1972 and used it on *Dark Side Of The Moon's On The Run*. But the most striking point was what Stockhausen said, that electronic music is the creation of a completely independent sound system, like an animated movie. You paint an animation movie and it's a world that you can see, but it's a closed circuit – it's just drawings.

Were you working on solo material while in Kraftwerk?
Yes, even before I joined them. I was studying counterpoint and making 12-tone

music, which was invented by Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Weber. The main thing that attracted me to Kraftwerk was their identity. I was following the paradigm of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, I loved *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, but if you want to come up with an idea then you have to come up with an identity, which is difficult. Every artist has to come along with his own theory; their own view of the world, style and mixture of what music is all about.

Do you have any criticisms about electronic music production today?
No, I can't listen to all of that. It doesn't really matter what source you use to compose music; I can easily imagine making music with just an upright piano. I'll tell you a secret: in the 70s my former colleagues always said the guitar is an instrument of the middle-age, but it doesn't matter, that has nothing to do with it. Music is the sound in the air – actually it's 'sounding air', sound vibration. What matters is where you hear it. It's very important to have this notion that you go to a place where people perform music.

Perhaps one of the benefits of album sales declining is a refocusing upon live music...
The meaning of music – or an important attribute of music – is that it's transient. It is not meant to be recorded. The first recording was in 1877 for communication – telephones. Then they started to cut music from geographical regions, but by being recorded it is also cut from time, but it's not meant to be that way. There is silence, then we have music, then it dies into silence, and recording is artificial. It's nice to listen to a Beatles record, or a speech by the King of England or Winston Churchill, but the real secret of music is that it is like life.

So you're saying that recorded music is essentially dead?
The notes are just a timeline. We have one bar, we have the meter, and we put the little number – the bpm – on top of it, but, like you say, it's dead. But we can also bring it to life. People have this notion of recorded music being real. Every DJ on stage says it's real, and everyone in the audience considers this recorded sound as life. So nowadays, we have this notion of a DJ playing live, but actually a DJ is somebody who plays a film. But I'm not against it.

Do you plan to make more music?
I have to; this is how I see the world. I live in music; I can't go out of it.

Danny Turner

We await news of an English translation, but German speakers can already enjoy *Der Klang der Maschine*, Karl Bartos' autobiography, published in August 2017

As well as Electronic (beginning with 1996's *Raise The Pressure*), Karl Bartos has collaborated with artists such as OMD, Anthony Rother, Flatz and Deine Lakaien

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SOUND OF THE CROWD

NO LONGER JUST THE SOURCE OF PULSATING DISCO BACKING TRACKS OR BLEEPS AND BLOOPS FOR FURROW-BROWED OBSCURISTS, THIS WAS THE AGE WHEN SYNTHESISERS AND SEQUENCERS EMERGED FROM THE STUDIO, TOOK TO THE STAGE AND BECAME CENTRAL TO THE SOUND OF POP IN THE POST-PUNK ERA…

IAN WADE

1980-1984 saw the biggest surge imaginable in synth-pop, with electronic music infiltrating – nay, taking over – music in general. Many of the acts that emerged during this period, such as New Order, The Human League, Eurythmics and Depeche Mode, would go on to be both massively successful and still influential in later years.

The year 1980 alone saw debut albums by DAF, Yello, OMD and John Foxx, plus Gary Numan's *Telekon*, Japan's *Gentlemen Take Polaroids*, Talking Heads' *Remain In Light* and Robert Palmer's *Clues*. 1981 saw a virtual chart takeover with Ultravox, Soft Cell, The Human League and OMD all becoming Top 5 acts, and radio featured Dave Stewart & Barbara Gaskin, Godley & Creme, Laurie Anderson and Aneka sounding futuristic between Shakin' Stevens and *Hooked On Classics*. Must-have new albums were arriving thick and fast, from *Dare* to Cabaret Voltaire's *Red Mecca*. Synths were adding a new dimension to pop's pin-ups, with the (initially quite synthy) Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran, and new sounds were informing the likes of Tears For Fears, Simple Minds, Thompson Twins and Howard Jones. The emerging technology was having a massive effect throughout music: not only expanding the ideas of ABC, Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Scritti Politti, but also helping breathe new life into variety duo Dollar, proggers Yes and rockers ZZ Top.

THE YEAR 1980 ALONE SAW DEBUT ALBUMS BY DAF, YELLO, OMD AND JOHN FOXX, WHILE 1981 SAW A VIRTUAL CHART TAKEOVER BY ULTRAVOX, SOFT CELL, THE HUMAN LEAGUE AND OMD ALL BECOMING TOP 5 ACTS

It was by now a prerequisite for any 80s film to have a synth-based soundtrack, either by Vangelis (*Chariots of Fire*, *Blade Runner*) or Giorgio Moroder (*American Gigolo*, *Flashdance*, *Electric Dreams*, *Cat People*, *The Neverending Story*), but things were moving fastest of all with music itself. The underselling Roland 808 and 303 came to the fore, illuminating the dancefloor with releases from D-Train, Shannon, SOS Band and Change, and helping drive the songs that turned Prince, Madonna and Michael Jackson into megastars. The Hi-NRG emerging from the clubs combined barmy Italian disco with New York doof and headed directly into the charts, bringing with it fresh voices, freedoms and desires, and a host of hits.

Synths were now officially big news. Indeed, 1980 practically began with presenter Kieran Prendiville attempting to explain the all-conquering Fairlight CMI synth/sampler on the BBC's *Tomorrow's World*. Fairlight inventor Peter Vogel had shown his device to Peter Gabriel when he was recording his third solo album; impressed, Gabriel got together with Vogel to sell the CMI in the UK. Before long,

Quitting Ultravox in 1979, John Foxx embarked upon a brave and adventurous 1980s, creating the masterpiece synthesiser album *Metamatic* and more

© Michael Putland/Getty Images

THE PLAYERS

THE ARTISTS WHO SHAPED THE SYNTH SOUND OF THE EARLY 80S...

ULTRAVOX

Perhaps the oldest band on the scene, Ultravox had been an almost entirely different outfit with John Foxx, but with the success of *Vienna* they became a full-on synth-pop hit machine and scored a dozen Top 30 singles – including *All Stood Still* and *Dancing With Tears In My Eyes* – and six Top 10 albums in the first half of the decade. They featured on *Do They Know it's Christmas* largely due to Midge Ure being the co-writer, and would be the only synth-based turn on the UK leg of Live Aid.

OMD

While everyone was getting bigger and then crashing, Andy McCluskey and Paul Humphreys were one of the most consistent synth bands of the early 80s. A run of singles from *Red Frame/ White Light* in Feb 1980 through to 1984's *Never Turn Away* included a stellar string of hits such as *Souvenir, Joan Of Arc,* and *Maid Of Orleans* (where they bought white noise to the Top 5). Even the then-considered mis-step of *Dazzle Ships* has grown in stature as a brave, experimental masterpiece. They are the band that taught Vince Clark that electronic music could be emotional.

DEPECHE MODE

Depeche Mode barely even existed when the decade began, but by the end of 1984 they'd gone through pop stardom, line-up changes and were heading towards bigger things with *Some Great Reward*'s samples and throwing radiators down the stairs. They managed to survive Vince Clarke's departure, brought forward Martin Gore to be the key writer and expanded their sonic template with the addition of Alan Wilder. By the end of the decade they'd be one of the biggest bands in the world.

NEW ORDER

Again, in 1980 New Order technically didn't exist. It was only a tragedy that created them, but they managed to become very much their own thing by 1982, and with a string of singles such as *Temptation, Blue Monday, Confusion, Thieves Like Us* and the album *Power Corruption and Lies*, they far exceeded their old band. Another band whose 1980s would only get better, with the singles compilation *Substance* and the Ibiza-recorded classic *Technique* following on.

THE HUMAN LEAGUE

If ever there was a rags-to-riches tale, then the splitting in half of The Human League in 1980 leaving the non-musicians with the name and a whole ton of debts while the other half swanned off to become Heaven 17, and then recruiting a couple of schoolfriends and within 12 months becoming the biggest band in Britain, this would be it. A bit of inactivity led to the much-delayed *Hysteria* and the appearance of guitars on their tunes, and 1984 may have only yielded a couple of releases, but the group's reinvention is the story of the period.

"We wanted to be Abba AND Stockhausen" – Andy McClusky and Paul Humphries of OMD embodied an experimental-meets-commercial outlook

© Chris Walter/WireImage

Both hailed and derided as "an orchestra in a box", the Fairlight CMI stored real instrument emulations on floppy disks. The Mk1 cost £12,000, the much-improved Mk2 £30,000

the Fairlight would become an essential tool for artists like Kate Bush, Geoff Downes, Trevor Horn, Alan Parsons, Rick Wright and Thomas Dolby. Despite the fact that this was a huge period for record sales and that many previous 'non-musicians' were now creating viable records, synths, sequencers and drum machines were seen as a huge threat by the Musicians Union (and they were sneered at by Queen and Phil Collins, though by 1984 they would cave in too).

CH-CH-CHANGES

But something was stirring away from the traditional centre of the UK music biz. After a series of singles, Mute moved into releasing albums. The first was *Die Kleinen und die Bösen*, the Conny Plank-produced second album by German band Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft (DAF); the next was the semi-conceptual Silicon Teens album… but then tapes of a quartet from Essex unexpectedly arrived. Having ditched the name Composition Of Sound and found a singer in Dave Gahan, Vince Clarke, Martin Gore and Andy Fletcher became Depeche Mode, performing their first gig in May at the James Hornsby School in Basildon, where Gore and Fletcher were pupils. Mute were initially wary, but when *Some Bizzare* came sniffing around and nabbed them for a compilation, snapped them up.

The year 1980 saw a lot of acts reconfiguring themselves into better, more successful incarnations. Some of it – John Foxx leaving Ultravox, The Human League splitting in two – was essential for survival. Another transformation began in tragic circumstances when on the eve of a US tour, Ian Curtis, the singer with Joy Division, took his own life on May 18. The remaining members – Bernard Sumner, Peter Hook and Stephen Morris – formed New Order, and were joined by Gillian Gilbert in the roles of guitarist and keyboardist.

Meanwhile, a club called Billy's in Soho, run by Steve Strange and Rusty Egan, had become something of a hot new joint, attracting anyone who liked a bit of a dress-up. In need of music to play, they formed a band. Hooking up with Egan's one-time Rich Kids bandmate Midge Ure, the trio began demoing in 1979 and soon completed the line-up with Ultravox's Billy Currie, Magazine's guitarist John McGeoch, keyboardist Dave Formula and bassist Barry Adamson. Visage's debut album came out in November (having been finished before *Vienna*), and *Fade To Grey* would peak at No.8 in February 1981.

Having met during those sessions for Visage at the tail end of 1979, Midge Ure joined Ultravox, replacing John Foxx, and steered the band towards a much more electronic sound. The Conny Plank-produced album *Vienna* initially reached No.14, but once the title track is released at the start of 1981 it climbed back up to No.3 and became one of the biggest sellers of 1981.

John Foxx, meanwhile, was carving himself a considerable reputation with the release of the single *Underpass* and the album *Metamatic*.

While Spandau Ballet were riding the synthesiser wave with the release of *To Cut A Long Story Short*, just up the motorway in Birmingham their soon-to-be rivals Duran Duran were busy signing a deal with EMI. At this vital point there was also Japan's first album for Virgin, *Gentlemen Take Polaroids*; New Order's live reveal and first album *Movement*; Gary Numan's *Telekon*; and another OMD album, *Organisation*, after the breakthrough Top 20 successes of *Messages* and *Enola Gay*.

Internal conflict inside The Human League saw Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh leave the band just ahead of a European tour. Facing near-ruin, Phil Oakey and Adrian Wright went ahead with their planned tour with the freshly-recruited Joanne Catherall and Susan Sulley, plus temporary member Ian Burden from local band Graph. The first single with the new line-up, on the sleeve at least, was *Boys And Girls*, and although Sulley and Catherall didn't feature on the recording, it became their then-highest charting hit at No.48 in early 1981.

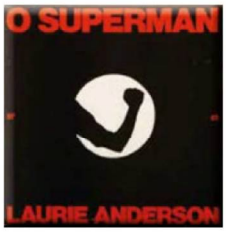
> IF 1979 AND 1980 HAD BEEN A TRIAL RUN FOR SYNTH-POP, BY 1981 IT WAS EVERYWHERE. SYNTHS WERE THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND A STRING OF NO.1 HITS, AND THERE WAS A NEW KIND OF POP EMERGING

ELECTRONIC MAINSTREAM

If 1979 and 1980 had been a trial run for synth-pop, by 1981 it was everywhere. Synths were the driving force behind No.1s *Tainted Love* and *Don't You*

Want Me, Aneka's *Japanese Boy* and Dave Stewart & Barbara Gaskin's *It's My Party*. With both *Vienna* and *Fade To Grey* in the Top 10 at the start of the year to *Don't You Want Me* on top that Christmas, there was a new kind of pop emerging, with big hits seeping into the public's consciousness such as *O Superman*, *Just Can't Get Enough*, *Love Action* and *Souvenir* and the emergence of a whole new crop of pop stars.

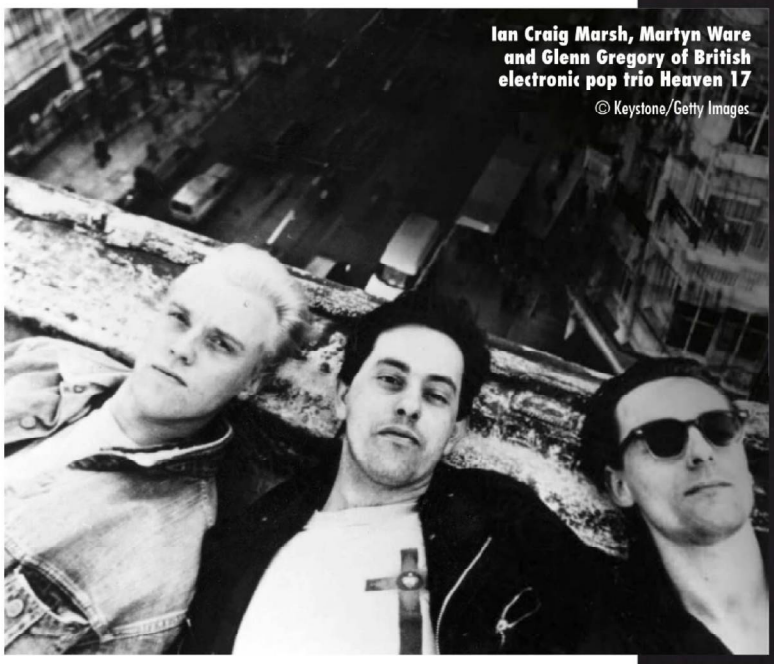
The first signs of new music from the other half of The Human League came in the form of a mostly instrumental cassette-only release called *Music For Stowaways* under the BEF banner. Their first project would be a band with vocalist Glenn Gregory called Heaven 17, whose debut single *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* was released in March. Their debut album *Penthouse and Pavement* followed in September.



Kraftwerk released their *Computer World* in May. Focusing on the subject of technology in the everyday and a modest success, its influence would soon be felt. Soft Cell released second single *Tainted Love*, which had long been a live favourite in their early sets; the single flew to No.1 in September 1981, becoming the biggest selling single of the year (and one of the biggest of all time).

Japan hit the Top 20 in August 1981 when Hansa reissued *Quiet Life* plus a compilation of their pre-Virgin material, *Assemblage*. Slightly confusingly, Hansa continued to release tracks throughout 1982 while Japan were promoting new album *Tin Drum*, with *Ghosts* becoming their biggest hit that March.

Another act finally getting some action were Glasgow's Simple Minds, whose fourth/fifth albums *Sons & Fascination* and *Sister Feelings Call* rode the synth wave with near hits such as *Themes From Great Cities* and *Love Song*. And having clawed their way out of the perceived dumper after splitting in two 12 months earlier, The Human League were entering an imperial phase following their three hit singles *Sound Of The Crowd* (No.12), *Love Action (I Believe In Love)* (No.3) and *Open Your Heart* (No.6). *Dare* entered the album chart at No.2 in October, making Phil and his wonky hair proper pop stars at last. The album would reach its chart-topping peak the following week and then would return there in January on the back of their Christmas No.1 single *Don't You Want Me*.



Ian Craig Marsh, Martyn Ware and Glenn Gregory of British electronic pop trio Heaven 17
© Keystone/Getty Images

A look at the album charts at the start of 1982 would see *Dare* at No.1, *Travelogue* back at No.59 and *Reproduction* at 76. The Top 100 was also liberally sprinkled by acts like OMD, Soft Cell, Duran Duran, Japan, Ultravox, Depeche Mode and Heaven 17. Acts that were used to spending a hopeful fortnight in the charts had now become the mainstream. It was a glorious moment, and one about to right a couple of history's wrongs.

LOVING THE ALIEN

Synth-pop by now was in its pomp, although the last rumblings of industry complaint were still to be heard; after a Barry Manilow live tour had seen the *Mandy* hitmaker using several synth players rather than a full orchestra, the Central London Branch of the Musicians Union passed a motion for an outright ban on synthesisers... which, though never official policy, did attract a degree of fuss. They eventually agreed to adopting a slightly less hostile outlook later that year.

The music itself continued unabated. Kraftwerk had originally issued *Computer Love* as a single from their *Computer World* album in July 1981. The single was issued with *The Man Machine's The Model* on the flipside and initially reached No.48, but EMI reissued it – against the band's wishes – with *Computer Love* relegated to the B-side. It became the band's biggest hit and reached No.1 in February 1982. At one point it was sharing the Top 10 with The Human League's *Being Boiled*, which also had benefited from renewed interest in the wake of *Dare*.

Having announced his departure from Depeche Mode at the end of 1981, Vince Clarke set about

The Linn LM-1 Drum Computer was one of the first drum machines to use samples featuring a dozen 8-bit percussion samples which were able to be individually tuned. Invented by Roger Linn after Steve Porcaro from Toto suggested he recorded drums to a computer chip, the then reasonably-affordable drum machine was snapped up by the likes of Michael Jackson and more significantly Prince, and is all over The Human League's *Dare*

Japan's frontman David Sylvian in London in 1981 in a shoot for the cover for the Eastern-influenced *Tin Drum* album

© Fin Costello/Redferns

JAPAN HIT THE TOP 20 IN AUGUST 1981. SIMPLE MINDS WERE FINALLY GETTING SOME ACTION RIDING THE SYNTH WAVE, WHILE AFTER SPLITTING IN TWO, THE HUMAN LEAGUE WERE ENTERING AN IMPERIAL PHASE

© Fin Costello/Redferns

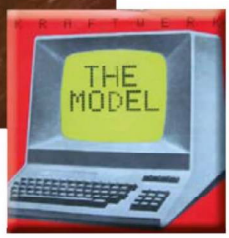
Neil Arthur and Stephen Luscombe of North London duo Blancmange in July 1982

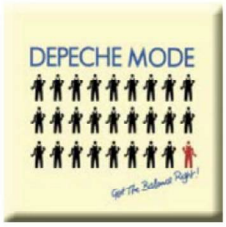
looking for a singer and responded to an advert placed by Alison Moyet in weekly inkie *Melody Maker* (it transpired that the pair of them had known each other since their school days in Basildon). Vince wanted to prove to Mute that he had more to offer, and so recorded a demo of *Only You*. When Mute agreed to a single, Vince quickly wrote *Don't Go* for the B-side but felt it was too good for secondary status, and it became the duo's follow-up.

There were signs that the US was slowly but surely falling for the synth-pop revolution too. While their League Unlimited Orchestra remix album *Love and Dancing* helped fill a gap over in the UK, The Human League's *Don't You Want Me* made its way to No.1 in the Billboard charts in July, accompanied by whispers of a second British Invasion. This was partly thanks to MTV, which had been launched the previous year. Few in the US had really got into the swing of making videos, so the channel turned to product from the UK, launching the US careers of Duran Duran (and Billy Idol, Madness, Bananarama and Dexy's Midnight Runners). Meanwhile, adapting to life post-Vince Clarke, future America conquerers Depeche Mode advertised for a new member, stipulating they had to be under 21. Alan Wilder lied about his age – he was 22 – but got the job as a touring keyboardist and made his first official appearance as a full-time member with the January 1983 single *Get The Balance Right*. As 1982 ended, The Human League's first new release since *Dare*, the Motown-y pastiche *Mirror Man*, reached No.2. Elsewhere, synths and samplers were helping drive hits by a new crop of acts such as ABC, The Associates, Tears For Fears and Wham!. Blancmange finally broke through with *Living On The Ceiling*, as did A Flock Of Seagulls, though their chart career would prove all too brief.

1983 started off slightly bleakly for fans of synth-pop. Primarily, there were numerous splits, with Soft Cell, Japan and Yazoo announcing their terminations in the first few months. OMD had arrived back with their *Architecture & Morality* follow-up *Dazzle Ships*; while it would eventually be regarded as massively influential, it sank rapidly from No.5 when released.

There was better news for ex-Tourists Dave Stewart and Annie Lennox, who had formed Eurythmics in 1980 and released a Conny Plank-produced debut, *In The Garden*, in late 1981. For the follow-up, the duo focused on creating an 8-track studio set-up in Chalk Farm, where they began to compile the monolithic album *Sweet Dreams*. Success still wasn't happening with initial single releases, but when they released its title track at the start of 1983, it shot to No.2 in the UK and would eventually top the Billboard chart later that year. Heaven 17 were celebrating too; they cracked the Top 40 when *Temptation* reached No.2 that spring and their second proper album *The Luxury Gap* tipped the scales at No.4, carrying additional hits *Come Live With Me* and *Crushed By The Wheels Of Industry*.





UNDER THE LIGHTS

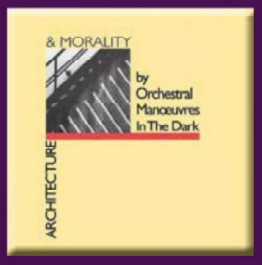
The origins of Hi-NRG can be traced to the Eurodisco of the late 70s, and the genre had burst onto the scene with the likes of Sylvester's *Mighty Real* and Patrick Hernandez's *Born To Be Alive*. By 1982, the music had taken on a much more electronic sound with Patrick Cowley's *Menergy* alongside Bobby O's productions like *Passion* by The Flirts and on hits by Divine, leading to a crossover in the UK charts, with songs that had been knocking around the clubs for a couple of years finally charting in 1983-84. While on the subject of dance, we must mention a solo recording by German guitarist Manuel Göttsching, who'd started out in the early 70s in Ash Ra Tempel; his repetitive, progressive hour-long track *E2-E4* was originally recorded in 1981 and would unexpectedly become a big hit later in the decade

The Roland TB-303 was released in 1981. Designed to replicate bass guitars, the product was deemed something of a failure and discontinued in 1984, but helped Orange Juice claim their first hit when used on *Rip It Up*. Though the TB-303 and the Roland TR-808 drum machine breathed their last in 1983, the two devices grew in popularity throughout the decade, and would become synonymous with acid house thanks to Phuture's pioneering *Acid Tracks* in 1987

The reassembled and reborn New Order on stage at the Capitol Theatre in Sydney, Australia on 29 November 1982
© Philip Wayne Lock/Fairfax Media via Getty Images

ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

SPEARHEADED BY DAREDEVIL DUOS, SYNTHS SANDBAGGED THE CHARTS



OMD

ARCHITECTURE & MORALITY (1981)

While *Dare* was being bigger and selling more and *Tin Drum* starting to woo the teen set, Virgin had another classic on their hands in late 1981 with OMD's third album *Architecture & Morality*. Clocking up a number 3 placing on the back of three Top 3 singles – *Souvenir, Joan of Arc* and *Maid Of Orleans* – it launched them internationally too, seeing them head the charts in France, Spain, Germany and Belgium. However, it was the other tracks that helped it become a fully rounded classic. For a good year or so, Andy McCluskey and Paul Humphreys were unlikely pop stars.

SOFT CELL

NON-STOP EROTIC CABARET (1981)

Much of synth-pop could be dismissed as cold and unfeeling, but Soft Cell's debut album dragged that ethos into clubland and sleazed it up. Marc Almond and Dave Ball had never really wanted to be pop stars, but the giddy success of *Tainted Love* threw them into *Smash Hits* and *Top Of The Pops*. With songs detailing the more grimy side of things, it was a more relatable collection than the aspirational go-for-it shininess offered elsewhere. They'd soon be on all the drugs and discussing Motörhead in interviews, but *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* endures today as Soft Cell's perfect manifesto.

YAZOO

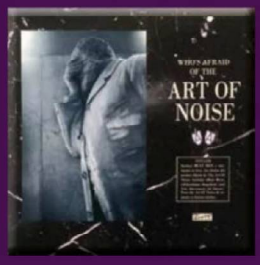
UPSTAIRS AT ERIC'S (1982)

Aside from Gillian in New Order, and Joanne and Susan in the League, and occasional cold-sounding backing vocals in usually German, there hadn't been much in the way of women in synth-pop at this point. That changed when Alison 'Alf' Moyet met up with Vince Clarke to record his demo of *Only You*. Literally a very odd couple, they lasted just over 12 months and were barely talking for half of that, yet together they brought soul to the scene, adding an emotional dimension previously unthinkable. Hot on the heels of the success of *Only You* and *Don't Go*, *Upstairs At Eric* reached No.2 in 1982.

NEW ORDER

POWER CORRUPTION AND LIES (1983)

The second New Order was essentially the band's debut, as *Movement* was very much released in the shadow of the weight of Joy Division, and Gillian's presence had yet to be fully felt. Released in May 1983, *Power Corruption & Lies* offered the perfect template for New Order to work on from there on. Although frustratingly it did not include their then-breakthrough hit *Blue Monday* (they were contrary sods back then), with tracks such as *Your Silent Face* and *Age Of Consent*, *Power Corruption and Lies* was good enough on its own not to need it, and became the band's first Top 10 album.



THE ART OF NOISE

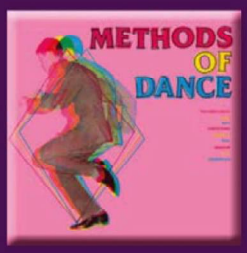
WHO'S AFRAID OF THE ART OF NOISE? (1984)

With ABC, Dollar and Frankie to name just three, Trevor Horn, Anne Dudley, Paul Morley, Gary Langan and JJ Jeczalik were all over the great pop albums of the first half of the 1980s. Disappearing behind masks and hammers to "make it about the music", *Who's Afraid Of The Art Of Noise?* was built on samples and became a hit with the body-popping set, as breaks from tracks such as *Beat Box* were much sampled in hip hop. Madonna even got married to *Moments In Love*. Well, Sean Penn actually, but it was playing as she walked down the aisle.

CASSETTE REMIXES

1981-82 PROVED TO BE A GOLDEN PATCH FOR LOVERS OF 1/8" TAPE. SLIDE ONE OF THESE INTO YOUR TWIN-DECK MONSTER, AND YOU'LL BE AWAY...

While you couldn't move for Walkman-friendly bonus remixes on the cassette versions of many albums back in the early 80s, there are very few remix collections from that time available as standalone releases, the only two genuinely worth your time being The Human League/ League Unlimited Orchestra's *Love And Dancing*, and Soft Cell's *Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing*. Essentially stop-gap releases released within a month of each other, each of these albums outshine other most people's 'proper' releases.



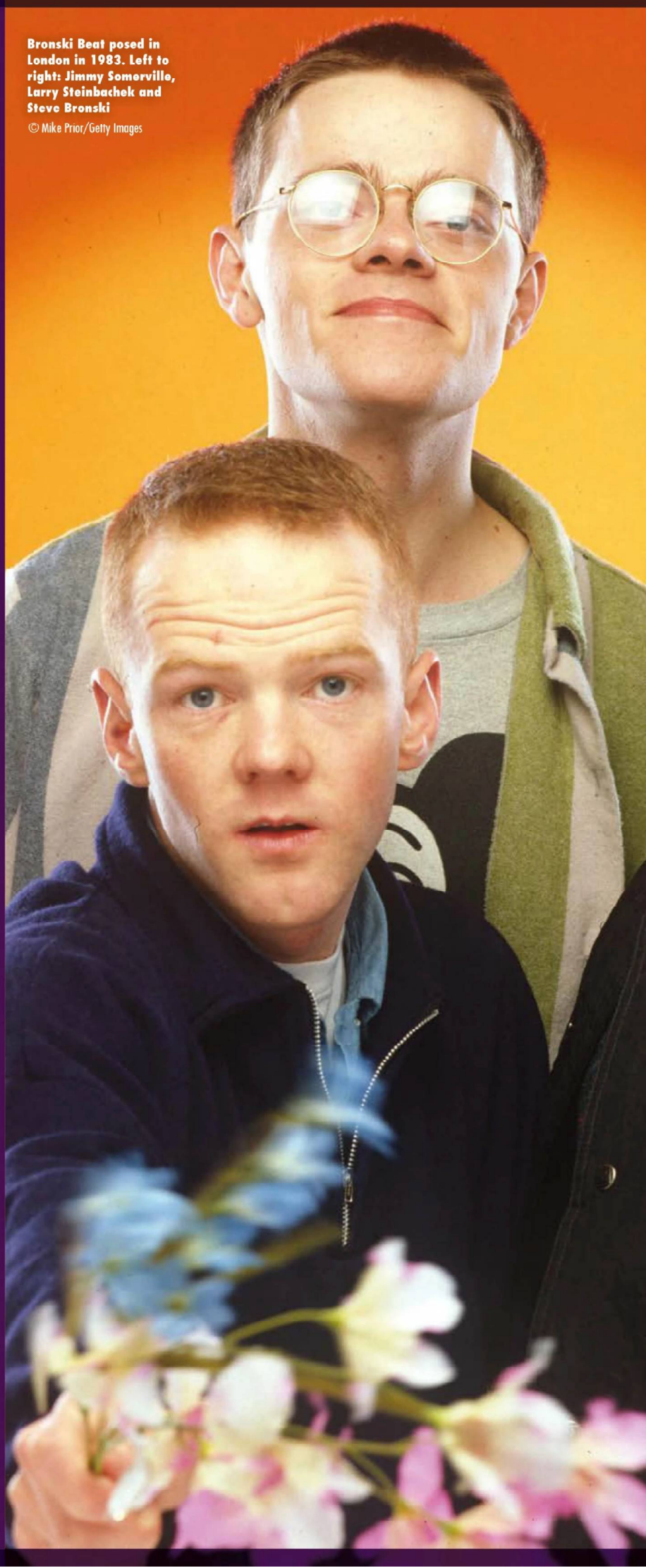
Love And Dancing was constructed by producer Martin Rushent who, inspired by Grandmaster Flash's mixing board technique, manually cut up the tapes and overlaid them over dub versions. There were approximately 2600 cuts on the finished album. Phil Oakey loved it, moreso than its parent album *Dare*, but opted to release it mid-price as not to rip off the fans.

Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing was, as the titled suggested, very much informed by Soft Cell's run-in with MDMA and New York nightlife. With remixes alongside new track *What*, the collection features perhaps the definitive version of *Memorabilia*, doofed up and featuring a filthy rap from Cindy X, who just so happened to be Marc and Dave's drug dealer. Fancy that!

For the best examples of compilations of this era, Virgin's *Methods Of Dance* from 1981 featured the League, Simple Minds, Japan, Devo and DAF on a dancefloor-aimed collection that was very of the moment.

Slightly broader was K-Tel's *Modern Dance*, a key collection of mostly Virgin turns such as the League, Japan and Heaven 17 alongside OMD, Visage, Depeche Mode, Gary Numan, John Foxx and The Cure, which was released at the end of 1981 and went Top 10.

A sort of unofficial companion, *Modern Heroes* on TV Records, followed along in October 1982. It threw Yazoo, Duran Duran and Pigbag into the mix, but by this time it felt a little after the event.



Bronski Beat posed in London in 1983. Left to right: Jimmy Somerville, Larry Steinbachek and Steve Bronski

© Mike Prior/Getty Images

The Yamaha DX7, the first commercially available digital synthesiser, was first manufactured in 1983 and soon became synonymous with 1980s pop thanks to Late Night FM specialists like Luther Vandross, Phil Collins and Kenny Loggins. Its distinctive presets were heard everywhere, and it was also all over Brian Eno's hugely influential *Apollo: Atmospheres And Soundtracks*, released in July 1983

1984 WAS THE YEAR THAT BRONSKI BEAT DROPPED THE IMMENSE, AND MOVING, *SMALLTOWN BOY*. WITH HYSTERIA AROUND AIDS GROWING TO ITS HEIGHT, ANY AIRING OF REAL-LIFE GAY ISSUES IN POP WAS RARE

with the Balearic Beat set, with its hypnotic minimalism an influence on many house and space disco producers.

Ostensibly an exercise in trying out some new equipment, New Order's *Blue Monday* has gone on to be one of the most iconic records of the era (strike that: of all time). Released as a 12" single, it had a Peter Saville-designed sleeve with cut-outs that resembled a floppy disc, a move which added a new level of intrigue and significance (and it also cost Factory 50p extra for each and every record pressed). Originally reaching No.12 in April 1983, its dominance in the clubs throughout the summer saw renewed interest, and it hit No.9 in October.

The year 1984 saw the first stirrings of a duo that would later bestride the planet of synth-pop like amiable colossi. Pre-Pet Shop Boys fame, Neil Tennant was employed as a journalist for *Smash Hits* magazine. During a trip to New York, where he was supposed to interview one-time peroxide faux-punks The Police, he arranged to meet with producer Bobby Orlando, whose work he and bandmate Chris Lowe had admired. Tennant played Orlando his demos, and a couple of months later Neil and Chris were in his studio recording early versions of the likes of *West End Girls* and *Opportunities*. However, PSB's story was yet to come; following the success of *Sweet Dreams*, Eurythmics were the big-hitting duo of the year, scoring another three hits (*Love Is A Stranger*, *Who's That Girl* and *Right By Your Side*) as well as releasing the album *Touch* in November, which reached No.1 at the start of 1984, while single *Here Comes The Rain Again* scored a No.8.

This was also the year that Bronski Beat dropped the immensely moving *Smalltown Boy*. The song had a huge impact on a generation of gay pop fans sadly all too accustomed to the "still haven't found the right girl yet" tone of too many pop interviews. With hysteria around AIDs growing to its height, any airing of real-life gay issues within a pop framework was rare. Bronski Beat's debut album *Age Of Consent* featured the pink triangle and listed the ages around the world where same-sex love was legal.

Stock Aitken & Waterman's first No.1 came at the close of our early 80s period. Dead or Alive had had some success before, but the Hi-NRG intensity of *You Spin Me Round* was the first song that could really match up to the larger-than-life personality of Pete Burns, and it finally made him the pop star he was destined to be in early 1985. SAW, indeed, would determine much of commercial pop's direction for the next five years.

As 1984 closed, the main players of synth-pop's most fruitful and impactful era were, well, all over the shop. Phil Oakey was seeing off the year with a single for the movie *Electric Dreams*, which he'd made with Giorgio Moroder, while Ultravox and Heaven 17 spent Christmas at No.1… but as part of Band Aid, with the Midge Ure co-write *Do They Know It's Christmas*. Looking back, it seemed like the magic was starting to fade and a significant era of pop – new pop, even – was at an end. ■

CLASSIC ALBUM

PENTHOUSE AND PAVEMENT

HEAVEN 17

BORN IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF INTENSE RIVALRY, THE CAUSTICALLY POLITICAL YET DEEPLY BEGUILING DEBUT ALBUM FROM HEAVEN 17 CLOTHED ITS RADICAL IDEOLOGY WITH ADDICTIVE ELECTRO HOOKS, FUNKY BASSLINES AND A DEEPLY SATIRICAL CORPORATE POLISH…

MARK LINDORES

Although The Human League's *Reproduction* and *Travelogue* had proved to be two landmark albums of the burgeoning synth-pop movement of the late-70s, the records' failure to live up to their promise commercially proved to be hugely problematic for the band as the 80s dawned. Though The League had been proclaimed as "the future of pop music" by no less an icon than David Bowie, the Sheffield collective were frustrated that their titles languished unsold in record shops while those of their peers – bands such as OMD, Gary Numan and Visage – had taken the sound to the top of the charts.

Soon, tensions within the band came to a head. Fearing that the pressure to have a hit would cause the whole group to implode, manager Bob Last engineered a split, unceremoniously ousting founding member Martyn Ware from the line-up.

"I turned up at the studio one day and they said they were throwing me out of the group," Martyn told the BBC in 2015. "I was extremely hurt because not only were we very close as a band, but Phil [Oakey] had been my best friend for years prior to that. There was an increasing amount of niggling arguments within the band… between myself and Phil in particular. But at that age we were just locking horns trying to determine who was the alpha male of the group – the founder or the lead singer. But what I didn't know was that Bob Last and the record company had already come to the conclusion that the band wasn't going to work and had engineered a plan to destabilise the group by dropping words in Phil's ear, telling him he should be the star and that it should be a vehicle for straightforward pop."

While Martyn felt betrayed and let down by his former friend and colleague, he was comforted by the loyalty of bandmate Ian Craig Marsh, who also left The Human League to embark with him upon the British Electric Foundation (BEF), an experimental production company on which they could collaborate with established artists and launch new projects.

The pair soon recruited Glenn Gregory to complete their new group. Glenn had been one of Martyn's best friends ever since they met at school, and had at one point been in the picture to front The Human League. His decision to move to London to pursue a career in photography had prevented him joining The League, but his regular retreats back home ensured he was kept abreast of what was happening on the social scene. Indeed, he had managed to sustain a position as a key figure on the Sheffield live music scene, frequenting the Meat Whistle arts project, the launchpad for countless groups including Cabaret Voltaire and Clock DVA. He was back in Sheffield on a photography assignment to shoot Joe Jackson for the *Sounds* music weekly when Martyn asked him to join the band – an offer he accepted on the spot.

Martyn Ware, Glenn Gregory and Ian Craig Marsh pictured by the Thames following the release of debut single *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* in March 1981

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THE PLAYERS

RELEASED September 1981

LABEL Virgin

PRODUCED BY
British Electric Foundation and Peter Walsh

ENGINEER Steve Rance

RECORDED AT
Sheffield, Maison Rouge

PERSONNEL
Glenn Gregory – lead and background vocals; Martyn Ware – synthesisers, Linn LM-1, piano, percussion, backing vocals; Ian Craig Marsh – synthesisers, saxophone, percussion synthesiser, keyboards, keytar, guitar, violin, piano, melodica; Malcolm Veale – synthesisers, saxophone; Josie James – backing vocals; Steve Travell – piano; The Boys Of Buddha – synthetic horns; John Wilson – bass, guitar, guitar synths

The friendship between Ian, Glenn and Martyn was fundamental to the instant rapport they discovered in the studio when they set about creating their own musical manifesto. While the new-look Human League had dared to change their direction in favour of a pure pop approach, Heaven 17 decided to take a wider view and incorporate their political opinions into their work. "It was a very political time and we wanted to address that in our music," Gregory told the BBC. "At the same time, we still wanted it to be dance music. However, pop music and political sentiment are two entirely different things and they didn't mix, even though we wanted them to."

Sheffield was going through an economic crisis following the destruction of the city's steel industry. The buildings that had once thrived with the buzz of manufacturing were now often used as rental spaces for musicians, artists and filmmakers. After taking advantage of the minimal asking fees to use these disused factories and warehouses to write and

TRACK BY TRACK

1 (WE DON'T NEED THIS) FASCIST GROOVE THANG

Clocking in at almost 160 BPM, *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* was completed within 10 days of the band's formation, and owes more to the futuristic dance of Giorgio Moroder than the experimental electro of Kraftwerk. Heaven 17 set about its creation by taking an instrumental track called *Groove Thang* – which they had initially written for the debut British Electric Foundation album *Music For Stowaways* – and giving it a funky, new-wave feel by adding a bass guitar rhythm track by John Wilson.

The single's condemnation of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan proved to be an ill-fated move. The song was banned by the BBC due to concerns by Radio 1's legal department that it libelled the new US leader.

2 PENTHOUSE AND PAVEMENT

Drawing an obvious influence from American R&B, the album's title track is a funk-driven groove that features female back-up singer Josie James on the chorus (a template which they would later perfect on their biggest hit, *Temptation*) and John Wilson on rhythm guitar. On the surface it's a party song, but the lyrics tell a different story, alluding to being a slave of a greedy capitalist system – a theme they would further explore on 1983's *Crushed By The Wheels Of Industry*.

3 PLAY TO WIN

Undeterred by the underperformance of *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang*, *Play To Win* was released as a single. Once again using dance music to soften the blow of their political message, *Play To Win* landed them their first spot on *Top Of The Pops*. Despite the increased promotion, *Play To Win* only reached No.46 – one spot lower than *...Fascist Groove Thang*.

In 2016, the song was introduced to a whole new generation when New York DJs The Martinez Brothers remixed it and made it one of Ibiza's biggest tracks of the summer.

4 SOUL WARFARE

Continuing the theme of selling your soul, track four on the album continued to hammer home the group's anti-capitalist stance. Presenting an overwhelming sense of spiritual desolation, *Soul Warfare* highlights capitalism's game-playing and the strategy that is involved in acquiring control: "You could be part of me/ Forget the wealth you're forsaking/ Your strategy is clear/ My soul is there for the taking." It is this damning call that brings the 'pavement' aspect of the record to a close.

5 GEISHA BOYS AND TEMPLE GIRLS

Ushering in a different sound, Side Two begins the 'penthouse' sequence of songs.

Contrasting sharply with the numbers on Side One, *Geisha Boys And Temple Girls* kicks off with a distinct synth solo which sounds like a cutting-edge take on a classical piece – rather reminiscent of the soundtrack to *A Clockwork Orange*.

6 LET'S ALL MAKE A BOMB

Let's All Make A Bomb is one of the album's most misunderstood tracks, with many listeners believing it to be genuinely a paean to making money. Ware dismisses this lazy interpretation, explaining the song is actually about "mutually assured destruction and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. You'd never put those in the lyrics," he adds, "but that was the philosophical basis we were working from."

Highlighting the idea that governments, ridiculously, can happily fund war and arms rather than tackling global issues such as famine, disease or industry, *Let's All Make A Bomb* is more relevant today than ever.

7 THE HEIGHT OF THE FIGHTING

Released as the final single from the album in 1982, *The Height Of The Fighting* failed to chart. Dealing with the subject of the Cold War arms race, the track serves as both a rallying plea for anti-capitalist insurgency while simultaneously satirising militarism.

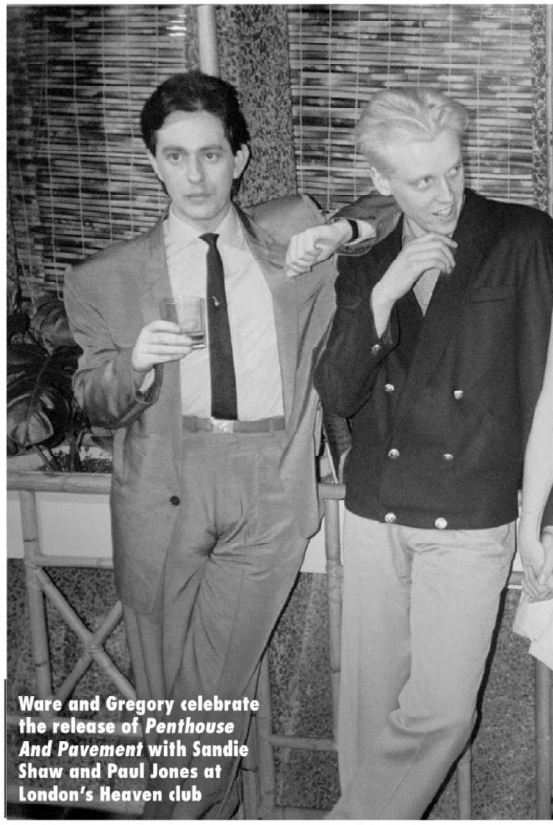
Musically, the song's innovative use of synths and samples proved influential for a whole generation of electronica artists.

8 SONG WITH NO NAME

If there was ever any doubt as to how much of an input Martyn and Ian really had into The Human League, the eerie *Song With No Name* dispels it. This curious number appears to tell the story of an artist struggling with debilitating writer's block, before smacking the listener with its sinister and mysterious concluding twist.

9 WE'RE GOING TO LIVE FOR A VERY LONG TIME

The album's closer *We're Going To Live For A Very Long Time* is another deceptively cheerful track. With its sing-along chorus inviting everyone to join them, Heaven 17 use joyous terms such as "fun" and "party line", but the offer is however prefaced with: "on the way to heaven"... giving the song a bleak inevitability.



Ware and Gregory celebrate the release of *Penthouse And Pavement* with Sandie Shaw and Paul Jones at London's Heaven club

demo tracks, the group's relocation into a studio only fuelled their creativity further.

While the city may have had an abundance of rehearsal rooms and creative hubs, professional recording studios were scarce and Heaven 17 found themselves sharing a studio with The Human League, who were simultaneously recording their own breakthrough opus *Dare*. The two bands were forced to establish a shift pattern with one recording at night, and the other taking over during the day. Sneaking a listen to what his

All of Heaven 17's early singles, including *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang*, *I'm Your Money*, *Play To Win*, *Penthouse And Pavement* and *The Height Of The Fighting (He-La-Hu)*, failed to crack the UK Top 40... but when they did, they hit No.2 with *Temptation*

© Virginia Turbett/Redferns/Getty Images

former group had recorded, the sense of rivalry only fuelled Martyn's own creativity. "I was massively motivated – it was like this great explosive supernova of creativity unlike anything I'd experienced before or since," he said.

Within days, the band had written and recorded *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang*, a song which would shape their musical identity, juxtaposing upbeat, dance-influenced tracks with lyrics which hammered home their political views – issues such as the arms race, nuclear war, religious extremism and the rise of the yuppie, a stance that set them apart from many of their peers.

John Wilson, a local session musician, was recruited to contribute the bass solo to *Fascist Groove Thang*. The result proved invaluable, not only for the song, but to the whole way the group wrote music; Ware later said meeting John alongside the invention of the Linn LM-1 drum machine were the two most significant occurrences during making the album. Wilson's accomplished ability as a rhythm guitarist allowed them to be more adventurous in their songwriting and created an entirely new avenue for them to explore. Indeed, the material recorded with Wilson had a new wave warmth and a more varied sound than the sparse electronica they had previously restricted themselves to.

The trio highlighted the contrast in material by dividing their debut album into two: the 'pavement' side of the record represented their primitive, electronic side, while 'penthouse' was where they featured a more vibrant, experimental sound.

Aside from the sonic reference, *Penthouse And Pavement* represented their own journey. "The duality of the penthouse and the pavement was the aspiration of what the working class could do if they set their minds to it, but grounded in a grim reality as we saw it," Martyn says. "The pavement side was us waving goodbye to our pure, electronic pop – that's where we came from. The penthouse stuff was an indication of where we were heading."

The public's first taste of Heaven 17 came with the release of debut single *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* in March 1981. Received positively by the music press, it looked as though Heaven 17 would score a huge hit and get their big breakthrough. However, a ban slapped on the song by Radio 1 for its controversial lyrics proved disastrous, and the single stalled outside the Top 40.

Two months later the group released *Play To Win*, but again the single failed to crack the Top 40 despite radio airplay and a performance on *Top Of The Pops*. This proved even more disappointing for Martyn and Ian, as it coincided with The Human League's first Top 20 success with *The Sound Of The Crowd*.

Undeterred, the trio released their debut album in September 1981. Critics praised their bravery in tackling global issues and their innovative take on synth-pop by incorporating futuristic funk into the mix. Despite not producing a genuine hit single, the album reached No.14 in the UK and spent a total of 77 weeks in the chart, making BEF's first pop project a success.

Ray Smith's iconic artwork for the album – a depiction of the band as businessmen wearing sleek suits surrounded by the latest state-of-the-art technology – helped define their aesthetic. It was an ironic take on the emerging yuppie culture and capitalist greed, but the message was lost on the movement it was mocking and songs such as *Let's All Make A Bomb* became adopted as anthems by oblivious fat cats and city traders. "Ian came up with the title of *Penthouse And Pavement* and we loved it. He also brought in a *Newsweek* magazine or something like that," Glenn told Penny Black Music. "There was an ad in it for something like Toshiba. It was a really dull ad for big business and Ian said we should make something like that the front cover. From there we came up with the logos which appear on the sleeve of 'The New Partnership – That's opening doors all over the world' and 'Sheffield-Edinburgh-London'. The latter came from a packet of Dunhill cigarettes that was in the studio and had something like 'London-Paris-Rome' on it. We stole all kinds of influences like that."

The careful construction of that slick image was a deliberate attempt at presenting themselves as a brand rather than a band, pre-empting the direction of the music business in years to come.

Having taken their name from a fictional pop group of the future, Heaven 17's forward-thinking and innovation in determining how a modern pop group should function has proved alarmingly prophetic now we are living in their future – with not only the group's sound, but the political issues they highlighted as relevant as they ever were. ■

> "It was a very political time and we wanted to address that in our music. At the same time, we still wanted it to be dance music. However, pop music and political sentiment are two entirely different things..." **GLENN GREGORY**

THE BIG PICTURE

PENTHOUSE AND PAVEMENT

Having hoodwinked the yuppies into thinking that they were in their corner with the *Penthouse And Pavement* album cover, Heaven 17's promo video for the title track continued with the same 'city slicker' image. Set in the headquarters of the BEF (British Electric Foundation), the video features the sharp-dressed businessmen brought to life and seemingly on the verge of closing a big deal – but their secretary (played by actress Emma Relph) is conspiring against them with some sneaky espionage. *Penthouse And Pavement*'s ambitious clip set the bar for a series of increasingly cinematic Heaven 17's videos, all enhancing their polished image. **youtu.be/33W3kMS2vp0**

GODFATHERS of POP

SPARKS

You can't discuss synth-pop's history without praising Sparks. From their groundbreaking *TOTP* appearances to becoming the first American mainstream synth-pop duo on the album *No.1 In Heaven* and making the Top 10 with their most recent album *Hippopotamus*, Russell and Ron Mael are still like nobody else around. Russell explains how Sparks have kept the flame burning for 50 years…

Why do you think synth-pop duos have lasted so long as a format? Vince Clarke tells us that "You can blame it all on Sparks"...
Ha! I'll take that as a compliment. For Sparks, being two people makes it simpler. We never thought we had to be a duo to make it work, it was how to do everything a traditional band can, in its simplest format. We've never been dogmatic about being a duo. We presented ourselves as a duo on *No.1 In Heaven* but Keith Forsey, who worked with our producer Giorgio Moroder, played drums on the album when he replaced all its electronic rhythm section elements. So there was another human being on that album, for instance.

***No.1 In Heaven* is rightly seen as hugely influential now, but the record was panned when it was released in 1978...**
It's curious, because it's forgotten that the album had three hit singles in the UK. The public embraced the album, it was only the critics who wrote "but Sparks are a rock band, and now I'm not so sure". We don't have any preconceptions about what the reaction will be to a record, we just aim for something exciting and fresh for us. Working with electronics and with Giorgio was just that, and fortunately the public were willing to come along with us on what we were presenting.

Do you see Sparks as a pop or a rock band?
We never see things in those terms. We're not black-and-white about what is pop or rock, or what music should be. Music should be anything, which is how we approached *No.1 In Heaven*.

Did you and Ron foresee how influential and surprising your first *Top Of The Pops* appearances would be regarded?
They made us realise that, apparently, Sparks weren't like other bands. Ron had those visual elements at our concerts, but seeing his facial mannerisms up close on television looked very striking. We had no idea what impact those appearances would have, and they helped Sparks create our own little niche. Our characters and the type of music we were doing – both the sound and the lyrical elements – were all distinctive.

Edgar Wright, the director of *Shaun Of The Dead* and *Baby Driver,* is making a Sparks documentary. What have you learned about yourselves so far?
Well, Edgar has come up with some really great archival footage – TV shows we'd never seen and couldn't remember doing, dating back to early British programmes from before we moved to London. Some of the kids' shows are interesting as a reminder of what 1970s television was like in the UK. We don't normally like to look backwards, but we're being exposed to reminders of our past. You can't help but think about how we've got to where we are today, especially seeing it through someone else's eyes.

Hippopotamus*, Sparks' 23rd studio album, features tracks such as *Édith Piaf (Said It Better Than Me)* and *So Tell Me Mrs. Lincoln Aside From That How Was the Play?

Who are the famous Sparks fans who will feature as talking heads in Edgar's documentary?
It's far better that I don't say right now. I'd love to mention them, because there are some fantastic people in the documentary who surprised us when we heard they're Sparks devotees. It's exciting to see who wants to be part of the film, in the diversity of musicians, writers and actors, but we want to keep it a surprise. We're hoping the documentary will come out around the time of Sparks' next album. Edgar has so much footage now, and everyone is trying to work as fast as possible to get both the film and the new album done.

Your most recent album *Hippopotamus* was Sparks' first Top 10 in the UK since *Propaganda* in 1974. How exciting is it to have that support so long into your career?
We didn't think that would happen with a current album, and it's really inspiring. It's inspiring us to creatively up the ante, and we've gone back into the studio with a very upbeat spirit. When we do new music, it has to be compelling and inspiring to us first. And having a director we really like in Edgar wanting to make a documentary about Sparks is very positive, too. The only way Ron and I can keep ourselves motivated is to stay fresh. We can't be lazy and rely on our past.

Ron and Russell Mael: "We have an urgency and a desire to constantly do something that will reach people in a modern way"

© Philippe Mazzoni

Has that excitement remained constant throughout your career? Have there ever been moments where you've thought "Maybe we can coast it"?

We really haven't. We've got a career arc most bands don't have – to be doing our 24th album and still be excited about creating music in a vibrant way, that's not normal. We have an urgency and a desire to constantly do something that will reach people in a modern way. It's a lot of work, and it's easy to lose that drive. It takes a lot of effort, so ultimately if you're not doing something you're really passionate about, then there's no reason to do it at all. We feel it's our obligation to be Sparks, but it's our desire as well.

How much do you and Ron buoy each other up if one of you is having a bad day?

We've worked together for so long that the process of making music has become familiar. But then, we're trying to find new ways of approaching that process of recording or having songs that keeps it feeling fresh. As much as we understand the process, when we go to make a new record we try to keep a naivety to it. We have a curiosity to us that keeps us both motivated. When we're in the studio, a big part is thinking "Ooh, what does that do? If we touch that on the console, what happens?" After so long, we can put things in perspective more. But the reason we still do what we do, and hopefully do it well, is going at everything in that positive spirit.

Who do you see as Sparks' spiritual heirs?

There is a spirit to what Sparks do, and it's interesting that the people who have spoken out on our behalf come from different types of music. Our attraction doesn't necessarily come from one specific element of our style; there are various elements people might like, because there's an amalgamation to Sparks' music. It's hard to guess who will find what aspect that makes it appealing to them. Some are the people within electronic music and the synth-pop duos mentioned earlier – Pet Shop Boys, Erasure. But there are also bands like Faith No More, who come at Sparks from a whole other perspective of getting something from our music. Then there's Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth, who's as far away from synth-pop as can be.

Having made so many diverse albums about so many subjects, do you have any ideas that you've not yet been able to fulfil?

We've had a couple of musicals that never got off the ground. But it's a dream which will now finally happen, because our movie musical *Annette* should be shot in July. We've been working on it with director Leos Carax for five years, and it's going to star Adam Driver and Michelle Williams. It's about a famous opera singer who marries a famous comedian. It's a very unlikely relationship and, once their child is born, odd things to start to happen. We've always wanted to do a longform narrative. We've seen a test of Adam in the studio – not 100% in character, just to see what he could sing. He was incredible, and seeing that was a treat. **John Earls**

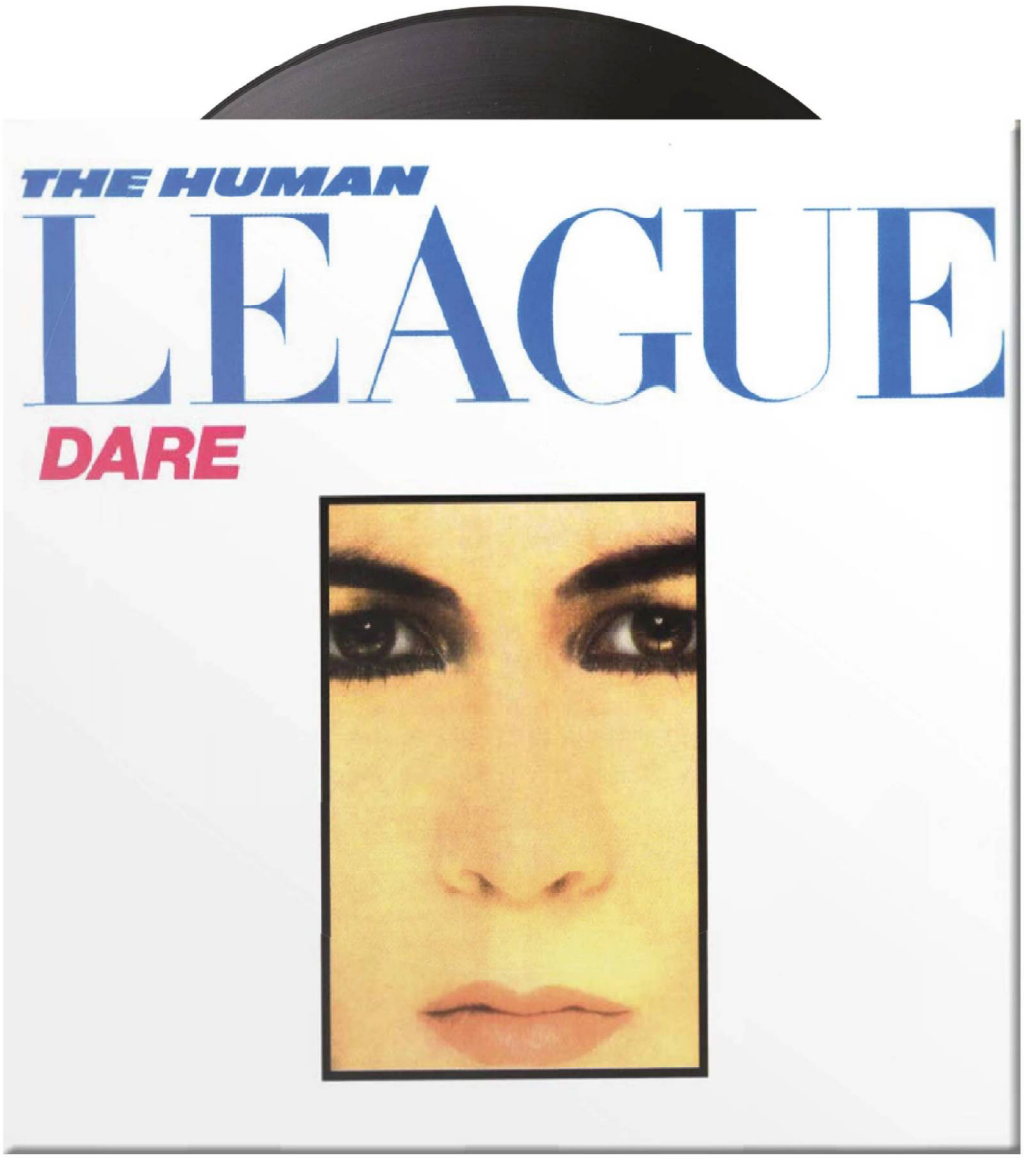
CLASSIC ALBUM

DARE

THE HUMAN LEAGUE

DRIVEN BY BREAK-UPS AND WROUGHT IN FIERCE COMPETITION, *DARE* SAVED VIRGIN RECORDS, SPAWNED A SINGLE THAT KICKSTARTED MTV, DROVE THE MUSICIANS' UNION MAD – AND DREW UP THE BLUEPRINT FOR SYNTH-POP

ANDY JONES



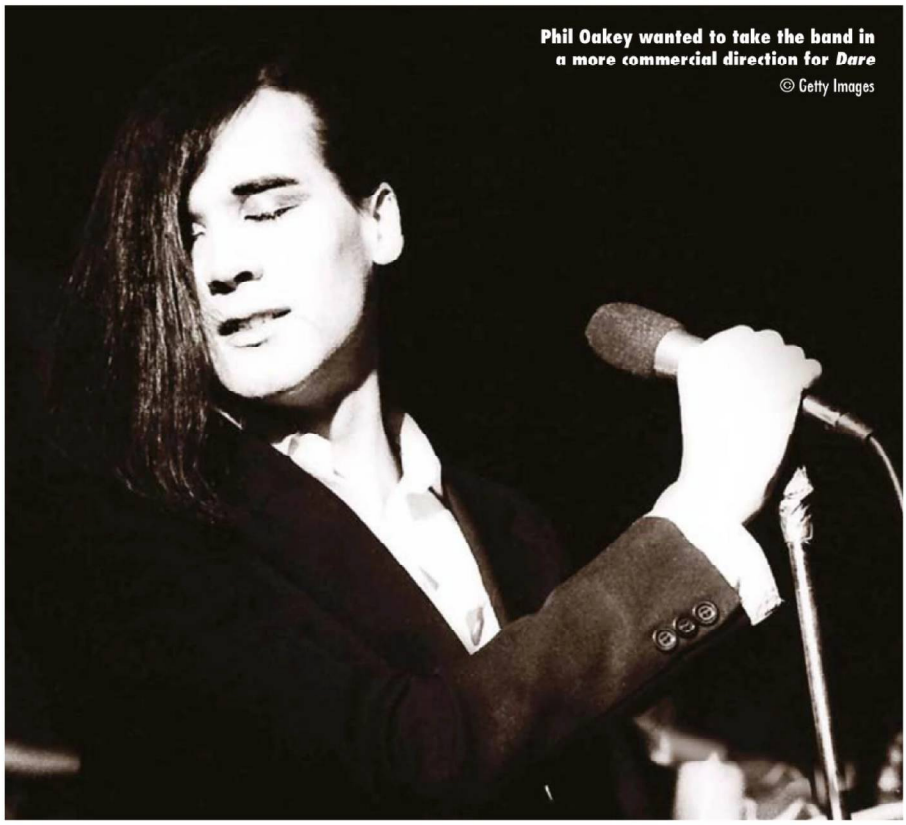
Until 1980 The Human League had been bleak and sombre synth pioneers. They were at the forefront of electronic music, yes, but not at the front of any charts. After a couple of years on Virgin they, and indeed their label, were desperate for success, but with Tubeway Army's *Are 'Friends' Electric?* Gary Numan had the first synth-pop hit, and he stole the League's electronic thunder.

The Human League's manager Bob Last had to act. There were huge tensions in the band, with lead singer Phil Oakey wanting a more 'commercial' sound while Martyn Ware wanted to retain the electronics. Bob Last was sure there were hits in there somewhere, but not within the line-up of Oakey, Ware, Ian Craig Marsh and Adrian Wright. He admits he used the troubles in the band to his advantage; "Everybody was frustrated, so I was proactively encouraging them to split," he told louderthanwar.com. The painful break-up worked out well for Last as he ended up managing both resulting bands: Oakey and Wright's The Human League and the brand new outfit, Heaven 17, with Ware and Marsh. It also worked out well for the listening public, as both bands would then record their most successful works.

Heaven 17 employed Glenn Gregory as their lead singer. Phil and Adrian's task was bigger, as neither of them had handled any of the playing, and there was a tour on the cards; if they did not complete it, they would be sued. Rather than immediately hiring musicians, Oakey spotted Joanne Catherall and Susan Sulley in the Sheffield nightclub Crazy Daisy, and asked them to join. It must be one of pop's greatest rags-to-riches moments.

What attracted Oakey was Joanne and Susan's fashion style – ironically more Numanoid than Human League. He also thought that the League Mk 2 would need a female to attract a greater audience. Here were two, and they were eventually joined by a 'proper' musician in the form of guitarist Ian Burden. The tour was completed, and Oakey fulfilled his obligations. Next: a new album.

Phil and Adrian began *Dare*, The Human League's third album, in late 1980 at Monumental Studios in Sheffield at the same time that Heaven 17 began their debut album... at Monumental Studios in Sheffield. "To say the atmosphere in the freezing studio was charged was an understatement," Glenn Gregory told *The Daily Record* in 2010. "The League worked days while we did nights. We'd hear early recordings of *Love Action* or *Open Your Heart* seeping through the door and think, 'That's what we've got to beat'. Or Phil would turn up early for his session to hear us working on *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* and think, 'That's pretty good, but I can do better'."



Phil Oakey wanted to take the band in a more commercial direction for *Dare*
© Getty Images

Phil and Adrian's early demos showed enough promise to please Virgin – besides, MD Simon Draper was a fan. A first single was recorded, the rather rushed *Boys & Girls*. It harked very much back to Human League Mk 1 rather than the more poppy path that Phil had envisioned for his version of the band, and it failed to get into the Top 40. Oakey and Draper realised that they needed help, so Oakey asked Ian Burden to join full time. As an all-round contributor to *Dare*, he would become an important part of the album's story.

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 16 October 1981

LABEL Virgin (UK) and A&M (US)

PRODUCED BY
Martin Rushent and The Human League

ENGINEER
Dave Allen

RECORDED AT
Genetic Sound, Streatley, Berkshire

PERSONNEL
Philip Oakey – lead vocals, keyboards, synthesiser; Joanne Catherall – vocals; Susan Ann Sulley – vocals; Ian Burden – bass, composer, guitar, keyboards, synthesiser; Jo Callis – guitar, keyboards, synthesiser; Philip Adrian Wright – keyboards, slides, synthesiser; Martin Rushent – programming

An even more important part was played by Martin Rushent. He had produced The Stranglers, yet was very much at home with the technology that The Human League had become known for, so Phil suggested him after Draper had hinted that an external producer might help them achieve the sound they wanted. Also, a move to Rushent's Genetic Sound Studio near Reading would prove a welcome departure from the rising tensions with Heaven 17 at Monumental.

Rushent's influence was immediate, and the next track he and the band worked on would be the start of *Dare* proper (*Boys & Girls* never made it to the album). Draper had perhaps led The Human League to believe that Rushent would merely just polish up a couple of early demos – *The Sound Of The Crowd* and *Love Action (I Believe In Love)* – but when Martin heard them he wanted the band to completely re-record them, much to their annoyance. So Burden and Wright played the synths, the girls had proper backing vocals for the first time, and the resulting version of *The Sound Of The Crowd* got to No.12 in the UK charts in April 1981, becoming The League's biggest hit to date.

The band quickly realised that Rushent's grasp of the cutting-edge synth and sequencing technology of the time was an important part of their sound, so they set about writing more songs while re-recording *Love Action* along with engineer Dave Allen. Another musician, Jo Callis, had meanwhile joined the line-up. His forte was the guitar but he quickly took on keyboard duties for what was shaping up to be a very synth-heavy record.

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

BEING BOILED
Not a *Dare* track, of course, but the stereo remix of the 'Fast' version of this composition was propelled to No.6 in the charts because of the album. The computer-generated Fast version of the video is rather good, but the grainy, live Granada TV one is great, as it shows how the Mk 1 version of the band differed from the Mk 2. According to Phil(ip), only people with long coats liked that version of the band – and this geeky video shows exactly why. **youtu.be/myzrnWbyz1s**

LOVE ACTION (I BELIEVE IN LOVE)
Something of a rarity, as the video was only made retrospectively for the US release and is not widely available to watch in the UK. Its opening wedding scene is based on *The Graduate*. The rest largely consists of Susan chucking stuff at the camera, Joanne wearing a massive Eighties jacket on a council estate, and the rest of the band watching a film like in the *Don't You Want Me* video. And Adrian? He's messing around with film again. **youtu.be/1M8a8ox_QeM**

OPEN YOUR HEART
One of the first videos which introduced The Human League 'look' to the public. It might have been a simple video but the blocks of colour were strong, the lighting dramatic and it cleverly included all of the elements that made up the brand that was the band: Phil's hair, the girls dancing, the synths and, importantly, the look of the album cover – Phil's face within a square on a white background – that was to come out two weeks later. Clever marketing. **youtu.be/pAqTJRH0eF4**

DON'T YOU WANT ME
By the time *Don't You Want Me* was released Virgin knew *Dare* was a success, so you can almost smell the budget on the video. Even 30 years on some of the shots still have a certain sophistication, including a 30-second plus segment panning from Catherall to Sulley for the 'waitress' bit. The video is based around a murder mystery film shoot and it was shot on 35mm, making it the most iconic piece of cinema ever to have come out of Slough. **youtu.be/uPudE8nDog0**

"Phil came in and said 'Right, I've got the chorus: Don't you want me baby, don't you want me, oh-oh-oh'. We looked round and said, 'Are you having a f***ing laugh?' And Phil was like, 'No, no, no... it'll be great.'" **DAVE ALLEN**

When the reworked version of the demo of *Love Action (I Believe In Love)* reached No.3 in the UK charts in August 1981, not only did the public at large wake up to The Human League Mk 2, but the record company gave the nod to go ahead with a full album. The writing team went into overdrive with Oakey, Wright, Burden and Callis all involved, and *Open Your Heart* was released in October 1981, two weeks before the launch of the album, complete with a video – still a rarity in 1981.

Named *Dare* after a Mekons song called *Dan Dare* (although Oakey also says that it was ripped off from a *Vogue* cover with a single word 'Dare'), the album was released to much acclaim, although the Musicians' Union kicked off because of its lack of 'real' instruments. It boasted just synthesisers and drum machines and, as these were relatively new, the MU was terrified that they would relegate human playing to just a button push.

The Human League cared not one iota. *Open Your Heart* was at No.6 and the album was selling well – and yet not quite well enough, apparently, to satisfy Virgin's

Simon Draper. He thought a fourth single should be released from the album and his choice was *Don't You Want Me*, a track the band had relegated to tenth place (out of 10) on the album's running order as it was one of their least favourites.

Jo Callis told louderthanwar: "We were almost recording as we went along. Adrian had this little book of instructions about how to turn all the equipment on and we would kind of potter about. *Don't You Want Me* came from such pottering. I was thinking along the lines of *Coati Mundi* and Kid Creole & The Coconuts, and then Phil had the idea of the *Pygmalion* lyric, and it all developed organically from there."

Engineer Dave Allen adds: "We didn't have a chorus, so we had to wait two or three days for Phil to knock one up. Eventually he came in and said, 'Right, I've got the chorus: Don't you want me baby, don't you want me, oh-oh-oh'. Me and Martin looked round and went, 'Are you having a f***ing laugh? F*** off!' And Phil was like: 'No, no, no… it'll be great.'"

Yet Phil wasn't convinced it should be single number four from *Dare*. He thought people might be a bit 'League'd out' by this point, and the girls agreed. But Draper thought it could be big so the song was released at the end of November 1981.

Virgin licensed the soon-to-be iconic video to a fledgling TV channel called MTV. MTV, desperate for content, played it on rotation, helping The League's sales Stateside. *Don't You Want Me* sold more than 2.5 million copies, reaching No.1 in the UK over Christmas and No.1 in the US six months later. The single helped *Dare* (or *Dare!* in the US) go triple platinum, spending well over a year in the UK charts which, in turn, helped save Virgin Records. Richard Branson conceded in his autobiography that *Dare* was a turning point for his company. He bought those behind it several presents, including a motorbike for Oakey. Not all the gifts were so lavish: "I helped save Branson's company, so thanks for the f***ing black-and-white TV!" said Jo Callis.

The success of *Dare* helped sell more of the first two Human League albums and even rocketed an early recording of the League classic *Being Boiled* into the UK Top 10, so it helped all the members of the League Mk 1; Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh had made a deal with Oakey so that he could continue to use The Human League name, and the pair would receive a 1% royalty on the first Human League album after the split. And what of Heaven 17? Well, they made their best record, *Penthouse & Pavement*, because of *Dare* and because of that intense atmosphere at Monumental Studios. "You had two bands desperate to outdo each other," says Glenn Gregory. "It inspired two very different groups to make their best-ever records." Sometimes, splitting up can be best for everyone involved. ■

TRACK BY TRACK

1 THE THINGS THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

It's a plodding start to *Dare* with basic beats and bass but with some memorable dry lyrics, plus a travel commentary a la Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express*. According to Adrian, it's a metaphor for what the band wanted at the time. Phil concentrates on travel, ice cream and Norman Wisdom, while the girls pipe up at the end "everybody needs love and affection".

2 OPEN YOUR HEART

Possibly the most complex track on the album in terms of arrangement, with layers of synths and effects on the beats – the opposite to the preceding track. It's an uplifting, melodic tune with downbeat lyrics about a breakup, so perhaps it could be seen as a metaphor for The League's original split where everything worked out so well in the end? Okay, maybe not.

3 THE SOUND OF THE CROWD

The Sound Of The Crowd could be seen as a bridging track between the Mk 1 and Mk 2 Human Leagues with an arrangement straight off the second album, *Travelogue*, and the girls singing properly on a League track for the first time. It was *Dare*'s first hit, reaching No.12, and it proved Martin Rushent's studio credentials.

4 DARKNESS

Once again *Darkness* offsets a fairly positive melody against fairly negative thoughts, in this case scary night terrors. These days it would have been written with uneasy chords and progressions, but not The League – they'll tackle any subject, backing it with some of the catchiest synth-pop going. Check out 1984 hit *The Lebanon* for proof.

5 DO OR DIE

This is another belter of a track, with more catchy parts than an Australian cricket team. Allegedly written about a poltergeist inhabiting a girlfriend (although probably not) it was the ideal closing to the first half of *Dare*. But if you thought side one of the album was good…

6 GET CARTER

The theme to *Get Carter*… played on a Casio. Not the first time The Human League had brought film and TV references into their work. There was *Tom Baker*, the B-side to the single *Boys & Girls*, plus we have to mention the *Hawaii Five-0* 'sample' in *Circus Of Death*. Still, a nice opener, and it almost acts as a gentle intro to *Dare*'s finest moment.

7 SECONDS

Seconds is the best track on *Dare*, as simple as that. The way it comes in, the screaming synth opener, the driving beat, Oakey's deadpan lyrics – it's The Human League at their best, and that includes either version. Again, it's about one of the most sombre subjects possible, the assassination of John F Kennedy, but this time there's no cheese, just synth drama. Could it even be the best Human League track ever?

8 LOVE ACTION (I BELIEVE IN LOVE)

Next, what a contrast: from chalk to vintage cheese. *Love Action* is possibly the finest Human League moment in pure pop terms. You have the synth cat opener, the unforgettable riffs linking sections, and that quite random "hard times" backing vocal at the start. Quite simply, this is the only piece of music that makes weddings worth going to, although watching pissed-up middle-aged dads trying to do the Oakey 'rap' is unseemly at best.

9 DON'T YOU WANT ME

You can see why it was a hit, true enough, but we're with Phil and the girls on this – *Don't You Want Me* might have shifted gazillions of copies, but either we've heard it too many times, or the rest of *Dare* is just so far ahead that it puts it in the shade. Still, it made the band, and it's probably the reason they are still with us.

GODMOTHERS of POP

ALISON MOYET

During the 1970s, electronic music was often seen as cold and robotic. That all changed in 1982, when Vince Clarke combined his synthesisers with the warm, soulful voice of Alison Moyet in Yazoo. The duo scored with *Only You*, which reached No.2, and a string of hits including *Don't Go* and *Nobody's Diary*. In 1984, Moyet went solo with the big hit *All Cried Out* before switching styles for a revival of the Billie Holiday ballad *That Ole Devil Called Love* and *Love Letters*. In 2013, Moyet returned to synth-pop for her album *The Minutes* and 2017's *Other*.

Do you think you got your voice from your family?
My mother loved to sing and my father had a beautiful, sonorous voice, but saw no purpose to a time signature and collected extra bars like a fruit picker. I think it was the inhibition in our family. Histrionics was a thing to share with all-comers. We spoke at a pace, with volume and violence, and all the women cried except my sister, who wasn't taking it from anyone. It was that belligerent lack of shame that put me on a stage and started me barking. We found out I could sing later.

Coming into the business via punk bands, what was the first electronic music you heard?
Probably Kraftwerk, or one of those Hairy Prog bands that the boys were lap-smudging to at the time. I think my eye was caught by Gary Numan. The melodic nature of his programming and his vocal affectations were fresh and intriguing.

How did you meet Vince Clarke?
I first saw him when I was 10, at our local community Saturday morning music school. I saw him at parties in our town, growing up. He sat in the corners playing guitar with [later Depeche Mode member] Martin Gore who was in my form class at school. We lived on the same estates from childhood to adulthood, so I saw him in the street. He was very blond – you couldn't miss him. I was playing in bands before the Depeche Mode lot and Vince had seen us. Our guitarist was Robert Allen, Vince's best mate. After Depeche split, he had *Only You* written and asked me to

sing on his demo. Not having a cassette player, I thought I could use it later as a vocal demo. There was no suggestion that we'd be making a record together, but his record company suggested we make an album, so we did.

Where did 'Yazoo' come from?
We were in Vince's car on the way to the studio and we needed a name. Yazoo was actually a name I'd toyed with before in other line-ups. It was the name of an American record label and I had some of their albums. I wrote it in condensation on the windscreen and we agreed. We decided everything quickly. We didn't deconstruct or debate. Or talk a great deal, come to that.

In retrospect, why do you think *Only You* was such a big hit?
Only You has a nursery rhyme aesthetic. It has a melody that invites all comers. Great classics do that. Music hall. Family song sheets. It suggests the age-old community purpose of song.

When you began your solo career, did you have a direction in mind?
No. It was reported that I left for that purpose, but Vince split Yazoo. I never wanted to be a solo singer. I had always played in bands, but I couldn't now because I had become isolated. I had no sense of myself as a solo act.

What led you back to synth sounds on *The Minutes* and *Other*?
I wanted the precision. When I record sometimes, I make sounds that require me to squeeze my head into a stone-hard, noduled gonad. It hurts. Lay that over an enhanced guitar and every loose fibre sinks into the grain and it sounds like you're dialling it in. Over electronica, like Formica, a puddle shows its shape.

Why do you think synth-pop remains so popular today?
It seemed like the last bastion of honest cultural adventure. We bought into people, not the industry. Freaks were bona fide, not designed. I think electronica before the Fairlight was the most interesting of all, when chords were unavailable unless inferred by passing lines of programmed notation. Who knows? We had our clothes on, mostly. Radical days.

What are your plans for this year?
I don't plan. I have a few art classes I want to sign up to, and to read a bit more history. I want to play live. I may write and record. I may just f*** off. I'll see what happens, like I always do. **Douglas McPherson**

The vinyl box set *Yazoo – Four Pieces* contains both of the band's albums, plus remixes and their complete BBC sessions, and is out now.

Alison Moyet: "Synth-pop seemed like the last bastion of honest cultural adventure. Radical days"

© Steve Gullick

CLASSIC ALBUM

NON-STOP EROTIC CABARET

SOFT CELL

SOFT CELL'S DEBUT ALBUM – INFORMED BY CLASSIC SOUL, JACQUES BREL, HI-NRG DISCO AND VOYEURISTIC TOURISM – TRANSFIXED MUSIC LOVERS WITH ITS SEEDY GLAMOUR AND DARK ROMANTICISM, A WORLD AWAY FROM THE COIFFED DAY-GLO GLAMOUR OF SO MUCH EARLY 80S POP…

MARK LINDORES

As Britain throbbed to the sounds of synth-pop at the dawning of the 80s, the emergence of a pair of no-frills Northerners who had more in common with Sparks than Steve Strange injected the genre with a gritty realism. Romanticising Soho's murky underbelly, Soft Cell shared its neon-tinged spotlight with the hookers, hustlers and degenerates whose work usually nestled under sex-shop counters, discreetly distributed in brown paper bags.

"We were basically two young lads living in Leeds who suddenly found ourselves in Soho," Dave Ball told *Penny Black Music*. "We would go to places like the Naked City Cinema just to get the vibe of it. We were like sex tourists, but without doing the sex! We were kind of like: 'Wow! This is really exciting.' We loved the imagery and the sleaziness. It was more an artistic thing than a sexual thing."

Dave and Marc Almond had met in 1977 at Leeds Polytechnic: Dave was enrolling, Marc was a second-year Fine Art student. He was also a well-known face on Leeds' performance-art scene, thanks to onstage antics that included stripping naked in front of a full-length mirror and smearing himself with cat food. After overhearing Dave's work while he was putting a show together, Marc asked if he could use some of the music in the show.

"He used to go past and hear these weird electronic noises I was messing around with, and one day he came in," Dave recalls. "My idea of pop music was very bleepy, minimal songs about Tupperware parties and mundane things. Marc heard some and said: 'Can I sing some of them?' and I said: 'Yeah. Why not? You've got a better voice than me.' That's how Soft Cell came about."

Marc and Dave began writing prolifically, soon establishing roles within the band. "Marc was like a lyric machine as well as a great singer," Dave says. "Eventually I said: 'Why don't you write all the words?' and that took it to a new level. We both just worked constantly, that was all I did, all day. I would get up in the morning, switch on my tape recorder, start my synthesiser and I would write five or six tunes a day, even just rough ideas."

"We shared a similar taste in music and art and a sick, twisted view of the world!" Marc told *The Independent*. "We wrote about the darker side of society and emotions and explored underworlds… but I don't think there was anything new about that. We were following in a tradition of bizarre music-hall songs, or French chanson where they sang about life in the gutter and the prostitutes on the street… it's real life, and there's something very passionate and very seductive about it."

Having amassed almost 200 songs, mixing the live music experience with Marc's performance-art background gave the band a unique standpoint and, with music and a look that reached out to anyone who had ever felt like a misfit or an outsider, they built up a strong following. After sending demos to record labels to no avail, they took matters into their own hands by borrowing money from Dave's mum to finance the release of a four-track EP on their own Big Frock Records label. Entitled *Mutant Moments*, Soft Cell pressed 2000 copies, one of which found its way to Stevo Pearce, a 17-year-old DJ and columnist for *Sounds*. After hitchhiking to Leeds to see Soft Cell live, Stevo, impressed by their show, offered to be their manager and also to put a track on a compilation album he was putting together for the Some Bizzarre label. They contributed *The Girl With The Patent Leather Face* and signed to the label, which was backed by Phonogram. After Soft Cell's single *Memorabilia* failed to chart, Phonogram were poised to drop Soft Cell until Stevo persuaded them to give them one more chance. Despite having hundreds of self-penned tracks, it was decided that a cover would be the best option.

Frankie Valli's *The Night* was the pair's original choice. But after hearing Gloria Jones' *Tainted Love* in The Warehouse, the Leeds club in which he worked, and discovering Jones' connection to his idol Marc Bolan, Almond suggested the song to Dave, a Northern Soul aficionado who knew it well. "I'd been collecting Northern Soul since 1975 and going to clubs like Wigan Casino and the Highland Room at the Blackpool Mecca," Dave says. "It was the same time that Kraftwerk released *Autobahn*, so suddenly I heard this electronic sound, and it was like 'boom!' – something huge went off in my head."

Soft Cell's take on the soul classic was a runaway smash, topping the charts in September 1981, hanging about the upper echelons of the chart for the remainder of the year. It was the biggest-selling single of the year, catapulting the band to infamy.

After their first *Top Of The Pops* appearance, Dave and Marc's lives changed overnight; particularly the latter, whose kohl-rimmed eyes leering down the camera and leather-cuffed arms

© Fin Costello/Redferns

Dave Ball and Marc Almond formed Soft Cell having met as students at Leeds Polytechnic in 1977

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 27 November 1981

LABEL Some Bizzare/Vertigo (original release)

PRODUCED BY
Dave Ball, Daniel Miller, Mike Thorne

ENGINEERS
Don Wershba; Paul Hardiman

RECORDED AT
Camden Cell Studio and Advision Studios, London

PERSONNEL
Marc Almond – vocals; Dave Ball – backing vocals, producer, synthesisers, electronic instruments, acoustic instruments; Cindy Ecstasy – backing vocals; Vicious Pink Phenomena – backing vocals

TRACK BY TRACK

1 FRUSTRATION

The perfect opener to Soft Cell's debut, *Frustration* is a re-recorded version of an early track from *Mutant Moments*, an independently-financed EP which they had released on Big Frock Records in 1980. It was a focal point of their outré live sets, which established Soft Cell's fusion of performance art, sex and synths all suffused with a sinister undertone, and the urgency of Almond's vocal is a perfect match for Ball's pulsating beats.

2 TAINTED LOVE

A make-or-break opportunity, *Tainted Love* was released after debut single *Memorabilia* had flopped. The record company gave them one final chance to score a hit, or they'd be dropped. Both fans of Gloria Jones' Northern Soul classic, Marc and Dave slowed down the tempo, lowered the key and, recording it with its signature sparse synths, made it entirely their own. It reached No.1 and shifted 1.3 million copies, becoming the biggest-selling single of 1981.

Alas, the duo earned practically nothing from *Tainted Love* as they included another cover on its B-side, The Supremes' *Where Did Our Love Go*, denying themselves a lucrative royalty payout. Almost four decades on, *Tainted Love* is their most enduring track, having been covered countless times. It is also sampled extensively by Rihanna on her hit *SOS*.

3 SEEDY FILMS

A hypnotic, almost ambient beat soundtracks the first of many songs on the album to celebrate the subculture of Soho and its status as a hub for outcasts and deviants keen to indulge in the illicit and perverse, revelling in dive bars and porno cinemas. Languidly delivering lyrics about the "Sleazy city, seedy films, breathing heavy next to my neighbour", while "blue films flicker while hands of a stranger get to know you", the city's sex trade could not be depicted more literally. Musically, that arrives in the form of a verse from Soft Cell backing vocalist Cindy Ecstasy and a trumpet solo from celebrated jazz musician John Gatchell over a groove that evokes Donna Summer's seminal *Love To Love You Baby*.

4 YOUTH

Amidst the sex and squalor that *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* has become renowned for are moments of remarkable maturity. The first of these is *Youth*, a poignant, at times heart-breaking ode to the passing of time with reflective, regret-filled lyrics. Musically, *Youth*'s haunting lyric is replicated by a sinister-sounding, heavily echoed drumbeat, with a short keyboard line following the bitter chorus.

5 SEX DWARF

Even without the perverse video for which *Sex Dwarf* has become infamous, the song itself is a benchmark of depraved pop. The lyrics conjure up a series of arresting subversive images as Almond recounts his list of erotic delights with a hilariously creepy delivery about "luring disco dollies to a life of vice" and wanting the object of his desires "...on a long black lead/ I will parade you down the high street" over a pulsating beat which bristles with the cracking of a whip, camera clicks and anonymous panting and moans. Superbly produced by Mike Thorne, *Sex Dwarf* could be the twisted sonic cousin of Depeche Mode's *Photographic*.

6 ENTERTAIN ME

A nod to Almond's performance-art background, *Entertain Me* opens with an a cappella opening verse which finds him in fine voice, before he is joined by Ball's throbbing electronica interspersed with theatrical, almost vaudevillian catcalls from a crowd of "Build 'em up! Knock 'em down!" and "Off! Off! Off!", lending the track an authentic nod to a London of yesteryear.

7 CHIPS ON MY SHOULDER

Having hit their stride on the preceding track, *Chips On My Shoulder* is a continuation of that song with the Hi-NRG beats and squelching synths, all punctuated with a crowd of taunts, shouts, whoops and whistles, culminating in an celebration of apparent petulance as Almond rejoices in a chorus of "Misery, complaints, self pity, injustice!"

"We put the album together in six weeks. We had 200 songs and whittled it down to what we felt were the best. We had a really good backlog of stuff we wanted to get out" **DAVE BALL**

flailing wildly sent shockwaves throughout Britain. "I wanted our first *Top Of The Pops* appearance to have an impact the way Bowie's had," he later said.

Soon, Marc discovered the glamour and fame of being a pop star were mere veneers – and being recognisable came with many pitfalls. An openly gay man, Marc was subjected to vile homophobia in the press and in the street. "I became the magnet for a lot of scary aggression," he later told *The Guardian*. "Soft Cell stirred up a lot of old prejudices and grudges. People found us really threatening. When people talk about gender-benders and bracket me with [Boy] George, I always think I wasn't like that. I had more of a rock edge, mixed with 80s electro. We were gothy, we loved the New York thing and people like Suicide; Dave loved Throbbing Gristle, we both loved the Sheffield bands and *Down In The Park* by Gary Numan/ Tubeway Army – we loved the darkness to that kind of electro. But there was a lot of hate directed towards us. I still lived in Leeds at the time, and it became very frightening to live there."

A respite came with the band being dispatched to New York to finish work on their debut album with producer Mike Thorne. "We put it together in six weeks," Dave says. "We had 200 songs and whittled it down to what we felt were the best. We had a really good backlog of stuff that we wanted to get out. Some of the stuff dated as far back as college."

Released on 27 November 1981, *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* was met with mixed reviews, though it's lauded in hindsight. Peaking at No.5, the album produced two further hits in *Bedsitter* and *Say Hello, Wave Goodbye*, as well as a remix album (*Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing*) and a longform video album (*Non-Stop Exotic Video Show*). US success also followed with *Tainted Love* reaching the Top 10 and spending an unprecedented 43 weeks in the chart (their only hit there).

Almost four decades on, *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* is regarded as a classic work, both musically and culturally. "I'm really proud of it – I think it's a great record," Marc told The Quietus. "But it came out of a tough time. We always thought we were anti-establishment, and we tried to be a bit of an antidote to what was going on at the time. We tried to shine a spotlight into what was really going on in Margaret Thatcher's Britain, the underlying darkness behind it all. When we wrote about Soho and the rest of it, it was really a representation of a microcosm of Thatcher's Britain. It wasn't really just about Soho, it was a metaphor."

Released when pop was dominated by overtly political bands and flamboyant fantasists, Soft Cell's gritty realism was an antidote to everything else in the charts. "We tried to be a bit more subversive, purely by being what we were," Marc said. "Getting a record on the radio felt like a triumph in itself because I was what I was, and Dave was this psychotic person behind the keyboards.

"A lot of 80s pop was very glossy and well-produced, all with super tans and super good-looking. We wanted to have a bit of a dirty air, the dirt under the carpet. We saw ourselves as portraying the Britain that was crumbling under the facade." ■

© Waring Abbott/Getty Images

8 BEDSITTER

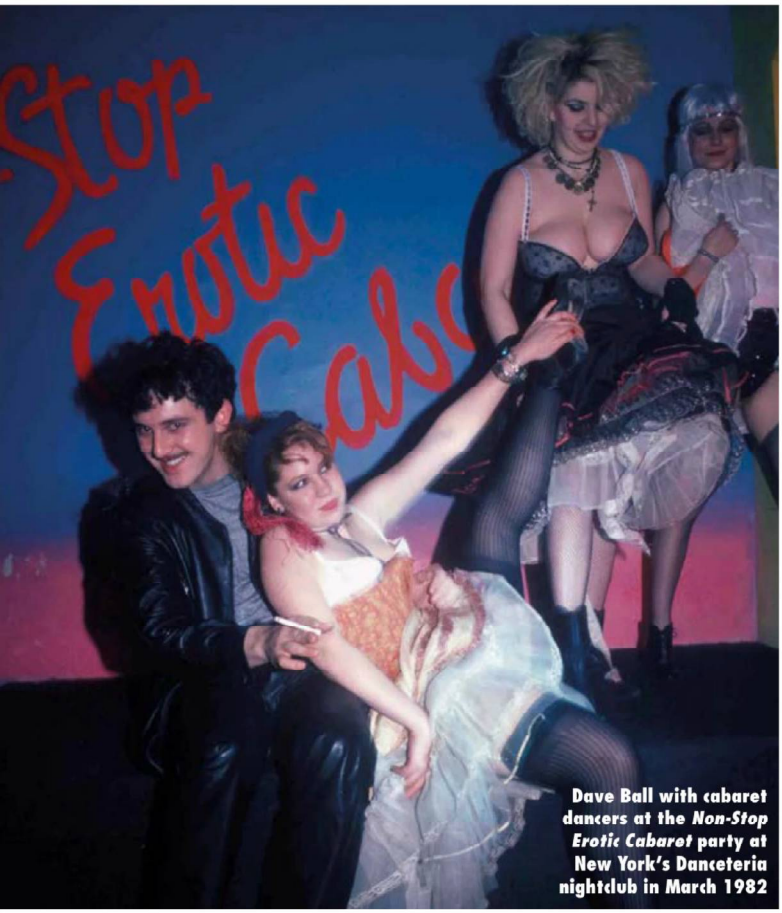
One of the finest depictions of the alienation of urban life, *Bedsitter* is a raw, visceral account of Almond's move from the suburbs to the big city. Set adrift from family and without friends, his only form of contact coming from chance encounters enjoyed while indulging in the city's bustling nightlife, he juxtaposes the highs of a night on the town against the empty, devastating comedown of the morning after. Released as the follow-up to *Tainted Love*, *Bedsitter* reached No.4 in December 1981, the first Almond/Ball-penned track to crack the charts.

9 SECRET LIFE

One of the highlights of the album, *Secret Life* is a jaunty, Northern Soul-inspired track which deals with the hypocrisy of a married man begging his partner to keep his secret before disclosing it to his wife himself, causing her to have "a nervous breakdown". With mentions of the partner being in possession of a little black book with the "names of people in the headlines", the song evokes politicians such as John Profumo and Jeremy Thorpe and their sex scandals, with Almond taking on the role of soon-to-be-disgraced adulterer with relish.

10 SAY HELLO, WAVE GOODBYE

Soft Cell's finest moment, *Say Hello, Wave Goodbye* is a sweeping slice of melancholia depicting the gut-wrenching breakdown of a relationship. Released as the third and final single from the album, *Say Hello, Wave Goodbye* reached No.3 in the UK and revealed a different side of Soft Cell to those who had previously been dismissive of them. A superb example of storytelling, its lyrics conjure up striking imagery, particularly the opening line of standing outside the Pink Flamingo, desolate and desperate. "That was Brewer Street in the rain," Marc later said, "outside the pink piano bar where the drag artists used to sing, with the neon light from the Raymond Revuebar reflected on the wet streets. It was what *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* was about, what Soft Cell was about, what I was about."



Dave Ball with cabaret dancers at the *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* party at New York's Danceteria nightclub in March 1982

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

TAINTED LOVE

Soft Cell's *TOTP* performance is recognised as the defining visual representation of *Tainted Love*. Yet its video, with Marc in Roman costume, Dave in cricket whites and Marc's partner in Victorian garb, is based on a narrative that Marc and his wife had a daughter, the 'tainted love' being that his wife had an affair with a black slave and the child was a product of this union, leaving Marc unable to accept 'his' mixed-race daughter. **youtu.be/xMjyzDZTPnc**

SEX DWARF

By far their most controversial music video, and one that remains clouded in mystery. Locked in a St John's Wood studio with some of Soho's sex workers, a dwarf, several kilos of raw meat, a chainsaw and various S&M tools, the video depicted torture, fetishes and BDSM. It was bootlegged as a 'blue' VHS sold in a Soho sex shop, and a police raid and a tabloid storm followed. A heavily cut and censored version is available online. **youtu.be/vTiv7l3u0vA**

BEDSITTER

After the *Sex Dwarf* controversy, Soft Cell's label insisted they soften their image. *Bedsitter* was a step away from the shock tactics as everything was implied rather than illustrated. While Dave trawls through London, on the Underground, across Piccadilly Circus to the dingy dives of Soho, Marc captures the song's isolation in a quirky bedsit set; the directing style is a precursor to Tim Pope's groundbreaking work with The Cure. **youtu.be/lbC4yxjydUc**

SAY HELLO, WAVE GOODBYE

The *Say Hello, Wave Goodbye* video was certainly the band's most theatrical. Taking place in the Pink Flamingo club of the song's lyric, Dave plays the heartbroken man who chances upon Marc holding court, revelling in his role as dramatic crooner while the romantic melodrama unfolds around him. All of the videos from the album (save for *Sex Dwarf*) were released as a VHS 'album', the *Non-Stop Exotic Video Show*. **youtu.be/y9KgEs3Zksg**

GODFATHERS of POP

NEIL ARTHUR

Neil Arthur came to fame as lead singer of Blancmange, the duo he formed with instrumentalist Stephen Luscombe. Their breakthrough *Living On The Ceiling* reached No.7 in 1982 and was followed by a string of hits including *Waves*, *Blind Vision*, *Don't Tell Me* and a cover of Abba's *The Day Before You Came* that did better in the UK than the original. The duo disbanded in 1986 but reformed for the album *Blanc Burn* in 2011. Since Luscombe's retirement due to ill-health, Arthur has carried the flag alone, most recently releasing current album *Wanderlust* in 2018. His other projects include Fader, with Benge (Ben Edwards).

When did you first get into electronic music?

The early Seventies or even a bit before, because my dad liked an artist called Tomita who used to rework classical pieces with synthesisers. I then got into Roxy Music. I remember seeing them on television with Brian Eno and Brian Ferry dressed in quite unusual clothes – or at least, clothes I'd never seen around Darwen in Lancashire! That was quite an attraction, and the final ticking of the box was that my mum really didn't like them. At 13, that ticked the biggest box: parents don't like 'em, of course I like them! Then a mate told me that Brian Eno had brought out an album called *Here Come The Warm Jets*, and that took me on a journey.

Were you making music yourself at that point?

There was a guitar in the house and I had a mandolin, a family heirloom that my dad renovated and gave me when I was a lad, but I was more into making sounds than actual songs. I remember hearing that the *Dr Who* theme was made by slowing down the sound of a piano string being struck, so I took the front off my gran's upright piano and thrashed around in there. That continued when I was at art college and met Stephen. Synthesisers were very, very expensive so we had to try and make something that would sound like synths with whatever we had to hand. At one time, Stephen had a vacuum cleaner on reverse thrust blowing through a saxophone. I had an amplifier I'd made that, to us, sounded better as the batteries

ran down, and we put things through that. It wasn't until the second album that we bought our own synthesisers. Before that we borrowed them.

When did you realise that what you were doing had pop potential?

We didn't. But I went to see a band called Young Marble Giants. Their album *Colossal Youth* is one of my favourite albums of all time. It was a massive influence on me and I said to Stephen that I reckoned we could make some of the experimental ideas we had into slightly more structured songs, with a verse and a chorus. We got the opportunity to do some support gigs, notably with Grace Jones and Depeche Mode, and by that point we were getting a little bit of interest from record companies and management. So we decided to give it a go, because it would be silly not to, but never thinking much would come of it.

How did you choose 'Blancmange'?

We had a gig coming up at the art college and we didn't have a name. Stephen was having a party the weekend before the gig and he'd made all these jellies. It wasn't something I wanted to eat, so I went out and bought a curry and accidentally spilt it on his front step. I managed to scrape it up into a pint glass and we were both standing there laughing, me with half a curry in a pint glass and him with a blancmange in a rabbit mould. We nearly called ourselves A Pint Of Curry, but decided on The Blancmange. Later on, the record company asked if we'd like to change the name, so we compromised and dropped the 'The'.

How would you describe your last album, *Wanderlust*?

There's lots of electronics on it. I've no idea if it sounds like what we were doing in the Eighties. It certainly wasn't my intention to do that, because I don't like to repeat things. But I suppose there must be references, because it's got my voice on it and we're using synthesisers that were certainly around then. I recorded it with Benge, who's got an amazing array of synths, and we used some very old stuff on there: an EMS VCS 3 and a Minimoog. In terms of the songs, I don't like to analyse them too much. I just write them and let other people make their minds up.

What are your plans for 2019?

We're doing more dates to support *Wanderlust* in April and May. I'm working on a new Fader album with Benge, and there are going to be some old Blancmange albums with extra material coming out in the spring. **Douglas McPherson**

Blancmange's spring tour begins in Bedford on 25 April. www.blancmange.co.uk

Neil Arthur of Blancmange: "We decided to give it a go, because it would be silly not to"
© Piers Allardyce

Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant: Pet Shop Boys' arch and uniquely Anglocentric take on New York-informed club sounds would make the unlikely duo standard bearers for synth-pop in the late 80s

© Mike Prior/Getty Images

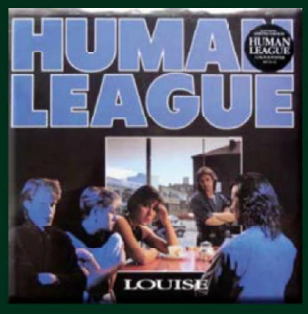
BY THE MID-80s THE POP LANDSCAPE HAD CHANGED. *WEST END GIRLS* WAS INSPIRED NOT BY EUROPEAN ELECTRONIC MUSIC BUT BY GRANDMASTER FLASH'S *THE MESSAGE*. THE NEW FACE OF SYNTH-POP HAD ARRIVED

TOGETHER IN ELECTRIC DREAMS?

WITH NEW SOUNDS BEING CO-OPTED BY THE HUNGRY MAINSTREAM, SYNTH-POP'S PIONEERS FACED AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS, A CHOICE BETWEEN AN OUTDATED PAST AND A SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE FUTURE. THE SOLUTION WOULD TAKE MANY VARIED FORMS... **MATTHEW LINDSAY**

In August 1981, two men struck up a conversation in a hi-fi shop on London's King's Road. One of them was buying a lead for his Korg MS-10, the other was an architecture student from Blackpool. It was the summer of synth-pop's golden year: Soft Cell's *Tainted Love* ruled the charts, Depeche Mode promised *New Life* and The Human League's *Love Action* hit No.3. All three bands issued landmark albums that year – *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret, Speak & Spell,* and *Dare*. Heaven 17's *Penthouse and Pavement*, Japan's *Tin Drum*, OMD's *Architecture & Morality* and singles such as Ultravox's *Vienna* all joined them. The guitar was dead, the machines – like the one Neil needed a lead for that day – had taken over. Before going their separate ways, the pair agreed to meet. Lowe could come over to Tennant's flat on that very street, and tinkle on that very synth.

Fast-forward four years to the mid-80s, and the pop landscape – and Tennant and Lowe's lives – had changed dramatically. They were making music as Pet Shop Boys; a name conjuring something "weird and English and New York and hip hop". They'd signed with EMI's Parlophone. Tennant had quit *Smash Hits*, where he'd been since mid-1982. By the end of 1985, a widescreen remake of a song they'd recorded in New York with Bobby Orlando was climbing the charts. A panoramic survey of the city's 'Bright Lights/Grim Lives', taking in James Cagney B-movies and TS Eliot's *The Waste Land, West End Girls* was inspired not by European electronic music but by Grandmaster Flash's *The Message*. *West End Girls* is what hip hop would have sounded like if it had descended from Edith Sitwell or WH Auden reading *Night Mail*. In the first weeks of '86, it would be No.1. The new face of synth-pop had arrived.



FINDING A FRESH PATH

At this point, the class of '81 had either disbanded or were struggling to repeat their early success. The Human League, despite making great singles, were stuck in a mid-80s post-*Dare* identity crisis. How do you follow perfection? OMD similarly struggled at first after the failure of 1983's *Dazzle Ships*. Suddenly this brave new music that had taken over the charts had limits imposed upon it.

OMD had seen synth-pop as a musical revolution which would supplant the rock orthodoxy of guitar music. They had been half-right. Synth-pop was a revolution but, like so many, it was one with unforeseen consequences. By 1985, synths were everywhere; a year later even Ferris Bueller had one in his bedroom, an Emulator (as played by Paul Hardcastle). But rather than just being the tool of constant innovation, they'd become part of pop's wallpaper. Even the power ballads the major labels loved so much, as they wrestled control back from these arty weirdos, were semi-synth-pop. When Elkie Brook's *No More The Fool* came on the radio in '86, for a moment you'd think you were listening to *Vienna*.

Those arty weirdos, the synth-pop pioneers, had become middle of the road. OMD expanded, incorporating – of all things – guitars, producing successful albums including the Stephen Hague-produced *Crush* and 1986's *The Perfect Age*. Stateside, their success grew; they were on the soundtrack to John Hughes' *Pretty In Pink*. But they'd embraced conventional song structures. It wasn't just OMD. Some 1984 releases – The Human League's *Louise*, Ultravox's *Dancing With Tears In My Eyes* – were fine pop singles. But little of the future shock, that jolt of hearing *Love Action*'s electro kittens purring to life at the start, remained.

AN ECHO OF SYNTH-POP PAST CAME VIA NORWAY'S A-HA, WHO CHOSE TO GO FROM PROG TO POP. THEIR RECORDS BALANCED DRIVING GUITARS WITH GRANDIOSE SYNTH FLOURISHES

But *West End Girls* wasn't the only synth masterpiece released that year. There was *Dr Mabuse* from ZTT's Propaganda, a chilly slab of first-wave synth-pop's fascination with all things European (see *Vienna* or The Associates' *White Car In Germany*). New Order's *Low-Life* and Scritti Politti's *Cupid & Psyche '85* were both steeped in New York's dance music scene. The city's nightlife helped New Order make the final leap from the shadows of Joy Division onto the dancefloor. They worked with Arthur Baker to make records that would get played there, like 1983's *Blue Monday*. In 1985, they refined their post-punk/synth hybrid with *Subculture* and *The Perfect Kiss* and the atmospheric instrumental *Elegia*. *Cupid & Psyche '85* was equally startling, made with Parliament/Funkadelic synth wizard David Gamson and Bee Gees producer Arif Mardin. Everyone from Martyn Ware to the Wets' Neil Mitchell still marvel at the synths to this day.

Released the same year, the Italo Disco record Taffy's *I Love My Radio* contains similarly dazzling, albeit somewhat cheesier lines, particularly on its extended version. An echo of synth-pop past came via Norway's A-ha, who released *Take On Me* in 1985. The trio had arrived in Britain just as The Human League and Depeche Mode were blaring out of radios and taxis everywhere. A-ha chose to go from prog to pop; their records, like *The Sun Always Shines On TV*, balanced driving guitars with grandiose synth flourishes reminiscent of Ultravox or Duran Duran's *Planet Earth*.

Thus, these hybrids had become the norm. Synth music frequently had a rock edge, blasts of guitar once seen as a rockist offence became obligatory; it became harder to define what was and wasn't

© Tim Roney/Getty Images

THE PLAYERS

BY THE MID-80S, A NEW SYNTH-POP ROYALTY IS RISING TO THE TOP WITH LUSH LIFE-SOUNDTRACKS GALORE...

ERASURE

In 1985 Vince Clarke at last found an ally that would last in Andy Bell. By October '86 the duo had racked up their first major hit in *Sometimes*, a rejuvenator for the scene. From there, the rest of the decade was theirs for the taking with virtually all their singles going Top 10 in the UK. A team-up with Stephen Hague in 1988 led to third album *The Innocents* and superstar status in the UK – plus their big break in the US.

PET SHOP BOYS

From year dot through to 2016's *Super* (and likely with the album they're working on now) PSB remain a pertinent presence in one way or another, but it was in the mid/late 80s that they were in their pomp. The duo's 'imperial phase' began in 1986 with debut album *Please* and continued on to the end of the decade. Neil Tennant felt they had uncovered "the secret of contemporary pop music" and he was right – the Boys could do no wrong.

A-HA

Norwegian trio A-ha hit their stride immediately with 1985's debut album *Hunting High And Low*, a chaste, yet defining moment of the decade that pretty much won over the globe in one fell swoop. Further success followed with 1986's second, *Scoundrel Days*, hitting the Top 10s across Europe and further afield. In fact, as with PSB, from 1985 through to 1988 the chiselled threesome were barely out of the upper echelons of the UK charts. Their (almost) uninterrupted run of eight UK Top 10 hits included *The Living Daylights*, a track recorded for the James Bond film of the same name – and a nice UK No.5 hit, too.

© David Redfern/Redferns

"ZTT's electro-collagists': Anne Dudley and Art of Noise performing live onstage

Eurythmics would release no less than five albums from 1985-89: *Be Yourself Tonight, Revenge, Savage, We Too Are One* and *Peace*

synth-pop. It had become a sometimes thrilling, sometimes uneasy bedfellow with everything. Hard rock had even embraced synths – see Van Halen's *Jump* with its chunky Oberheim riff. Queen, who had once proudly boasted about their records in the 70s being synth-free, created tracks such as *A Kind of Magic*, soaked in synth. Later on, singles like Europe's *The Final Countdown* – a soft-metal record propelled by a synth brass fanfare – hit No.1. Def Leppard's *Hysteria* owed much of its machine-tooled precision to the Fairlight. Listen to 1985's *Sleeping Bag* by Texan rockers ZZ Top – its staccato bursts of electronics can sound somewhat akin to Art of Noise, Trevor Horn/ZTT's electro-collagists.

A LOSS OF SIMPLICITY

In 1985 Eurythmics and Tears For Fears had hugely successful albums, *Be Yourself Tonight* and *Songs From The Big Chair*, respectively. Both albums, while still utterly dependent on electronic instruments, added a stadium-filling rock heft to their sound, with Eurythmics serving up transatlantic rock raunch (*Would I Lie To You?*). Tellingly, both bands were scheduled to play at Live Aid in July (Tears For Fears ended up being a no-show). The decade-defining live event was oft-described as "rock's coming of age". Synth-pop had been the realm of the autodidact, a place where non-musicians made music armed with electronics and ideas. Suddenly there came a renewed emphasis on "real musicianship", a return to the orthodoxy OMD once thought the world had got rid of.

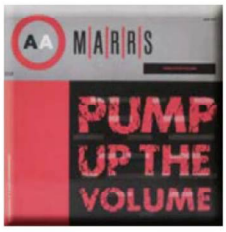
First-wave synth-pop derived its power from effective simplicity. "If you listen to early synth-pop, there's not much going on, so what is there has to be purposeful," says Martyn Ware. Yazoo managed to build masterpieces with only six or seven tracks of recording per song on them. However, since as far back as 1982's *Lexicon Of Love*, some pop had been taking the Trevor Horn approach, which was 'maximal', as evidenced by 1983's *Relax* (synth-pop on steroids?) and 1985's *Slave To The Rhythm* by Grace Jones. Synth-pop now existed within a world of endless technological possibilities including samplers and MIDI. Perhaps it was now the era of 'tech-pop'.

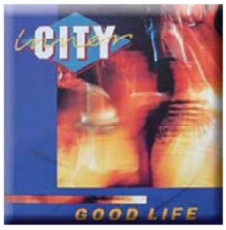
Horn/ZTT's cinematic productions proved influential. Quincy Jones apparently cited Propaganda's *A Secret Wish* as an influence on Michael Jackson's *Bad*. Pet Shop Boys wove it into their sound, too. At first they did so with the help of Stephen Hague, who transformed records such as *West End Girls* from electro into something cinematic. They worked with Horn's Fairlight programmer JJ Jeczalik on the original release of *Opportunities*, often used Rush synth whizz Andy Richards, and by 1988's *Introspective* had worked with Horn on two tracks.

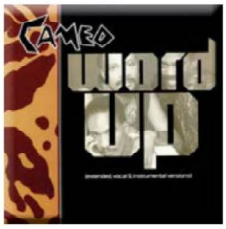
Sampling synthesisers now dominated pop production; the Fairlight was all over Horn's records from Art of Noise and beyond, and it was an integral part of *Cupid & Psyche '85*. The prohibitively expensive machine had more affordable competition from the Emulator (used on *Blue Monday* and *West End Girls*). Soon there'd be cheaper ones on the

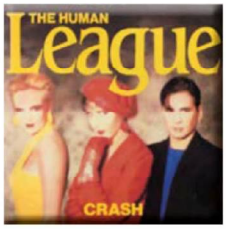
market, such as the Akai S900, which revolutionised mid-to-late 80s pop music the way cheap monophonic synths had facilitated the synth-pop boom.

Paul Hardcastle's huge hit *19* in 1985 showed how the Emulator sampler could make chart-toppers out of bedroom knob-twiddlers; a DIY cousin to the Art of Noise's lush-budget aesthetic. Sampling rose in tandem with the dance music that relied so heavily upon it, leading to the late 80s Acid House boom and hits such as MARRS' *Pump Up The Volume*. By 1986 Hardcastle had replaced Midge Ure's *TOTP* theme with *The Wizard*. In one sense it seemed as though dance music signalled the death-knell for synth-pop. In reality, the two fed off each other... dance had been heavily influenced by synth, while synth continued to use dance music as raw material for its survival.





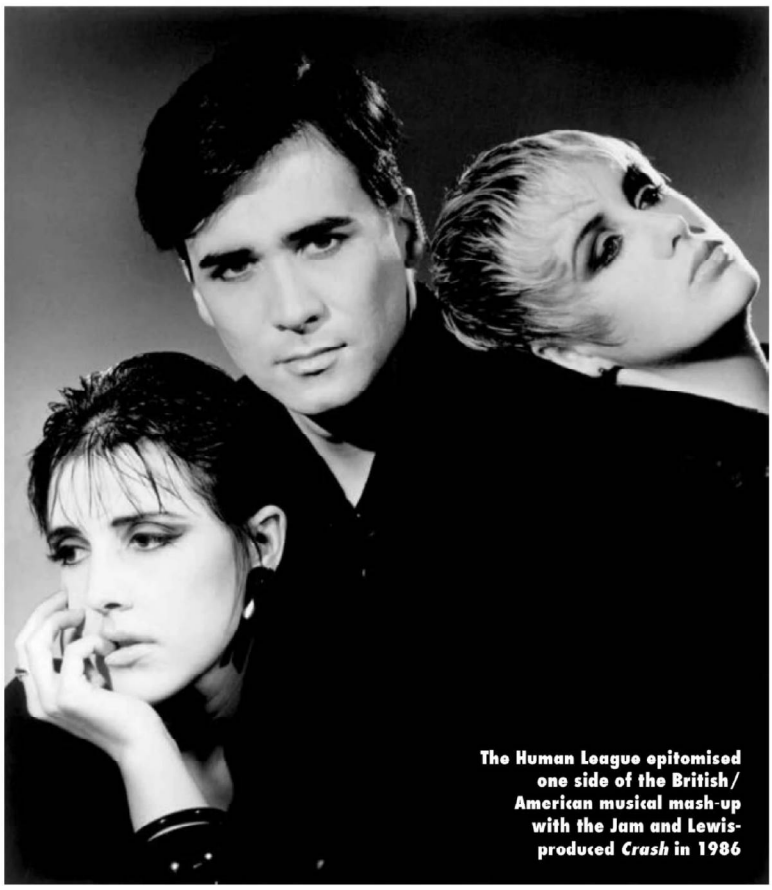




On Jamie Principle/Frankie Knuckles' *Your Love*, a 1986 early house milestone, the shimmering arpeggiated sequencer line is pure synth-pop. When the beat toughens and a synth pulses, you could be listening to The League's *Love & Dancing*. 1988 house masterpieces – Inner City's *Good Life*, for instance – stretched back to the roots of synth-pop, *I Feel Love*. You could say it wasn't synth-pop at all, or you could see it as a continuation of something that had started with Donna Summer/Moroder and carried on with Heaven 17's *Temptation* (see also BEF).

Inner City's Kevin Saunderson echoed the purist approach of Vince Clarke (Saunderson hated drum machine samples). By 1988, Frankie Knuckles was remixing Pet Shop Boys' *I Want A Dog*, turning the *Rent* B-side into a Deep House cut for that year's *Introspective*, which also featured a cover of the Chicago house classic, Sterling Void's *It's Alright*. PSB themselves functioned as a kind of sampler, absorbing all the dance music they liked... Shannon's *Let The Music Play*, for example. They often sought out those responsible for them, like Ron Dean Miller, producer of Nuance's *Love Ride* (Miller remixed the original *Opportunities*).

PSB weren't alone. Sparks, whose 1979 Moroder collaboration *The Number One Song In Heaven* is another early synth-pop masterpiece, released *Music You Can Dance To* in 1986, an album which trashes the need for a line between synth-pop and dance music. A year earlier, in September 1985, Erasure released *Who Needs Love Like That?* Next, Bell and Clarke's breakthrough hit, 1986's *Sometimes*, gave synth-pop past a fresh reboot (Soft Cell-like brass, the sweet nod to Yazoo's *Only You* in the breakdown).



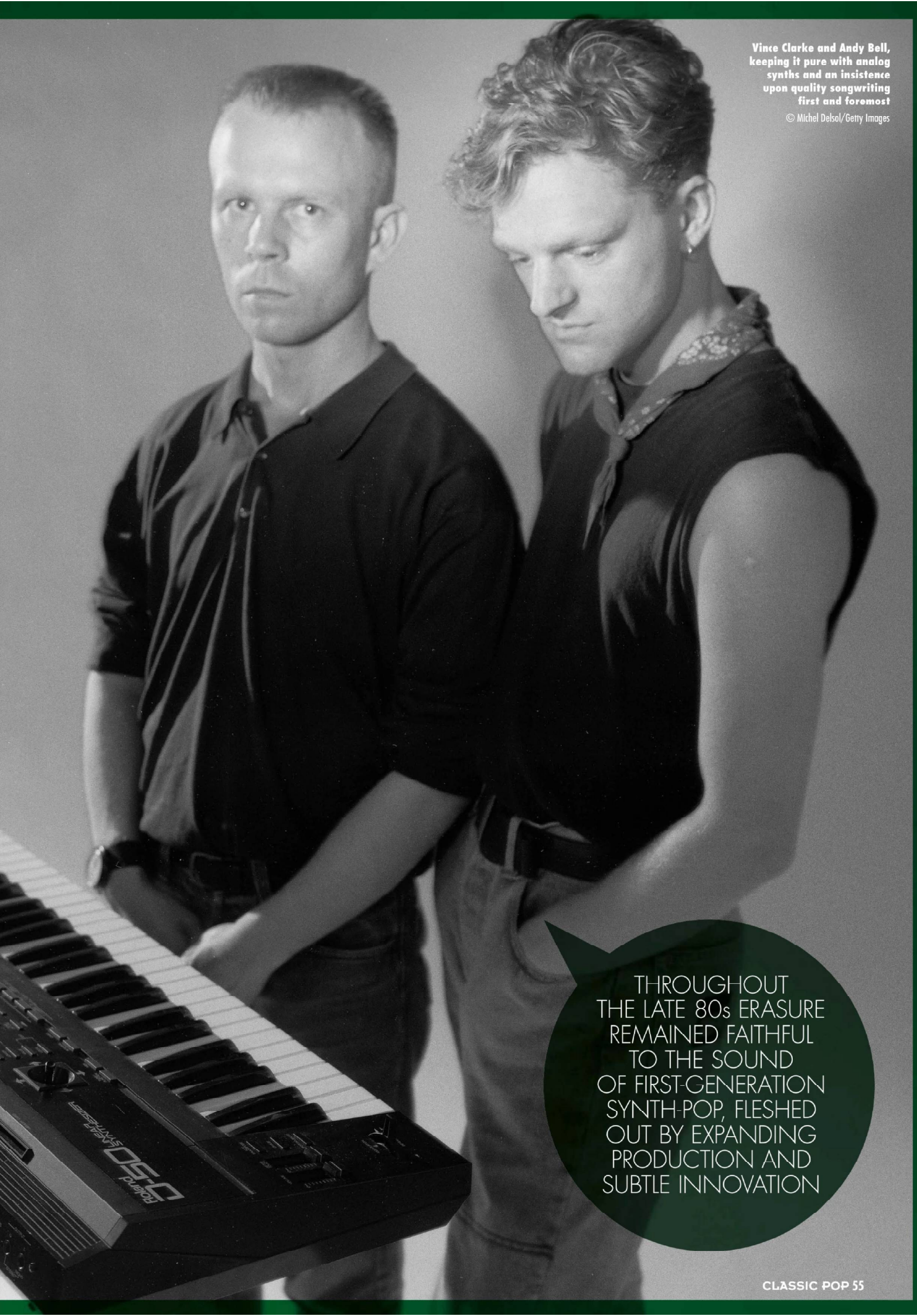
The Human League epitomised one side of the British/ American musical mash-up with the Jam and Lewis-produced *Crash* in 1986

Throughout the late 80s, Erasure remained faithful to the sound of first-generation synth-pop. Much of this was down to Clarke's use of synths such as the Pro-1, the Juno 60 and the ARP 2600, all deployed on *Speak & Spell* and Yazoo records. Across Erasure's four 80s albums this pure synth-pop core is fleshed out by ever-expanding productions (*Ship Of Fools*, *Blue Savannah*) and subtle innovation (note *Victim Of Love*'s proto-rave synths). Never stale, always unmistakably Clarke; a genuine synth auteur. Yet much of Clarke/Bell's appeal lay in the bare bones of their songwriting chops. The buzzing Korg sound on OMD's 1979 B-side *Almost* may have inspired Clarke to make music, but it was the Simon & Garfunkel song-book that made him want to be a composer. Erasure would compose their songs predominantly on guitar and piano before even approaching the synth.

Martyn Ware, who by 1987 was producing Terence Trent D'Arby, thinks of Cameo's *Word Up* as synth-pop, and no doubt it's heavily influential on synth-poppers both old and new (see Depeche's *Strangelove* in 1988 and Pet Shop Boys' *Shopping*). Ware's former band The Human League teamed up with Electronic R&B producers Jam & Lewis in 1986 for the *Crash* album. For Ware and his former band, it was a natural evolution; not everyone, however, was impressed. *Dare* producer Martin Rushent watched the League perform *Human* and shook his head in dismay: "This wasn't what I expected the future of The Human League to be."

DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

That idea, the 'future', was synth-pop's original destination (it had also been The Human League's original name). Synth-pop had been seen as the shiny pop soundtrack to the aspirational New Life early 80s dressing up and going out (it was always a bit more complex than that, mind: see the black hole in the ►



Vince Clarke and Andy Bell, keeping it pure with analog synths and an insistence upon quality songwriting first and foremost

© Michel Delsol/Getty Images

THROUGHOUT THE LATE 80s ERASURE REMAINED FAITHFUL TO THE SOUND OF FIRST-GENERATION SYNTH-POP, FLESHED OUT BY EXPANDING PRODUCTION AND SUBTLE INNOVATION

© Mike Prior/Getty Images

Dead or Alive's Pete Burns with wife Lynne Corlett Ducia. The SAW-produced *You Spin Me Round* brought success after seven long years of pop effort

hit-free centre of *Dare*). Now, though, synth music reflected a sad present rather than a bright future.

Maybe the innovators of synth-pop knew all along that their music was – as Bowie once said of *Low* – "a soundtrack to a future that never came to pass". Perhaps it explained the odd wistful nostalgia that undercut so much of this, ironically, the most forward-thinking of music (see OMD's *Souvenir*). When Eurythmics plunged fully back into electronics on 1987's *Savage*, the album's dark heart seemed to reflect Dave and Annie's oddly ambivalent attitude to the music that had made them stars in 1983. On *Savage*, synths are a backdrop to alienated psychodramas, such as *Beethoven*. Elsewhere, the song *Shame* elegantly sulks in the wings at the nightclub. Wistfully referencing both The Beatles ("all we need is love") and The Stones, it witheringly shades the present (the pursuit for a 'chic' life that doesn't exist). It was a synth-pop existential crisis; the sound of the crowd ringing hollow.

Synth-pop had been the reigning sound when Charles & Di married in 1981, and now Depeche Mode took a swipe at the media's frivolous obsession with the princess' attire on *Black Celebration*. It always had more of a social conscience than its detractors realised (*Everything Counts*, Heaven 17's *Fascist Groove Thing*). This continued in the late 80s with Erasure's *The Circus*, an electro-protest song about workers being replaced by technology. If that was ironic coming from a synth duo, it wasn't intended as anything other than "being fair", as Andy Bell told the BBC. Similarly, Pet Shop Boys sang of the severity of Thatcher's Britain, that "smack of firm government", on 1987's *King's Cross*.

If synth-pop early on had flirted with a Bowie-inherited androgyny, its anti-band set-up challenging the macho hegemony of the rock group, by the late 80s this had been complicated somewhat. The panic surrounding AIDS had prompted a homophobic backlash, with make-up rubbed off and closet doors shut tight. Erasure's Andy Bell seemed blissfully unburdened by all this; 1987's *Hideaway* is a less anguished cousin to Bronski Beat's *Smalltown Boy*,

ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

SYNTH-POP SPREADS ITS WINGS TO DRAW IN A MULTITUDE OF INFLUENCES

SCRITTI POLITTI
CUPID & PSYCHE '85 (1985)

The mid-80s *Lexicon Of Love*, *Cupid & Psyche '85* hides big ideas under irresistible surfaces; the essence of New Pop. Cutting edge technology (Fairlights, DX7s) and older keyboards (Moogs, Rhodes) provide a sumptuous backdrop for the Gartside voice. Some cuts (*Absolute*) have an almost kaleidoscopic wonder to their keyboard parts, fused with grooves to rival early Madonna.

PET SHOP BOYS
PLEASE (1986)

Of all the PSB 80s albums, their debut is the most underrated. The singles-packed A-side is peerless; *Love Comes Quickly* is equal parts Imagination soft-focus sensuality and Art of Noise sonic opulence. The real surprise, though, is the singles-free B-side, with Broadway-ready grandeur (*Tonight Is Forever*) meets the lusty (*I Want A Lover*) and the gritty (*Violence*).

DEPECHE MODE
BLACK CELEBRATION (1986)

A futuristic, sample-delic masterpiece, drenched in echo and bad vibes with darkly sensuous, ever-shifting textures, *Black Celebration* has more in common with art-rock pioneers such as Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel than *Dare* or, indeed, *Speak & Spell*. See also then-Mute labelmates Wire's 1988 *A Bell Is A Cup Until It's Struck* (1988) for some more synthy psychedelia.

NEW ORDER
TECHNIQUE (1989)

Most would opt for *Low-Life* as the New Order album of the mid-late 80s, but *Technique*, made partly in sun and E-soaked Ibiza during the house peak of 1988, is equally great. A mosaic of chattering, symphonic synths and fuzz-toned post-punk, it hit No.1 and was their last release on the soon-to-go-bust Factory label. Side Two's majestic four-song sweep is as perfect as pop gets.

ERASURE
WILD! (1989)

Their most ambitious 80s album, spawning Top 5 smashes *Drama* and, best of all, *Blue Savannah* (an attempt to write a synth equivalent of Roy Orbison's pop operas). Synth-pop past meets dance music future, with William Orbit-style electro bubbles; *Piano Song* could be a David Lynch score, while Bell favourite *You Surround Me* is the great Bond theme that never was.

POP MUSIC, AND SYNTH, WAS ALL ABOUT 'THE MOMENT', THAT HOOK-LADEN RUSH OF EUPHORIA. IN AN ERA RAVAGED BY AIDS, THAT MOMENT WAS STILL THERE... BUT IT WAS COMPLICATED NOW

while *A Little Respect* acted as a gay rights anthem on one level. Gay life and the spectre of AIDS were all over PSB's work, such as *It Couldn't Happen Here*, its orchestral grandeur constructed entirely from samples. They'd forgotten to book a real one but the eerie, disembodied feel suited the song perfectly. Pop music and, by extension, synth was all about 'the moment', that hook-laden rush of euphoria mirroring a rush of hormones. In an era ravaged by AIDS, suddenly, that 'moment' was still there... but it was just complicated now. That tension runs throughout PSB's 80s work, its street-level realism and sweeping, escapist romanticism, its constant fluctuating between happy and sad (the perfect pop equation).

Another strand of dance music PSB, Erasure and New Order all referenced was Hi-NRG, a sort of post-disco/synth-pop hybrid (its 1984 titular Evelyn Thomas tune was essentially *In The Navy* meets *Relax*). So too did the SAW hit machine, who dominated the charts in the latter stages of the 80s. Again, this was music made by synthesisers that fitted uneasily into the synth-pop category. Dead or Alive's *You Spin Me Round* revels in the possibilities of synthetic sound, not least in the dog sample of the TDF remix.

Hits including 87's *Respectable* by Mel & Kim featured stuttering samples of their voices, effervesced with electronic flourishes. Phil Harding credits keyboard players such as Andy Stennett for adding "interesting, funky, New York" sounds to SAW records. He also recalls Pete Waterman's eagerness to keep up with Horn's box of tricks, installing a Fairlight into the Hit Factory studio. Sadly its capabilities were never fully explored on SAW records as the decade wore on, as many contributors left the team. By the end of the 80s they'd too often reduced their sound to a cheesy formula, evidenced by early Kylie and Jason Donovan records; music where technology had a purely utilitarian role, there as a function to the song, shorn of synth-pop's early shock and awe; Dollar in reverse. Nevertheless, SAW records continued to fill the dancefloors of gay clubs, their uncomplicated joys remaining faithful to 'that moment', providing an escapist fantasy in a dark period and beyond.

A soft-focus New Order in 1989, the year of *Technique* and its US dance hits *Fine Time* and *Round & Round*
© Bob Berg/Getty Images

DEPECHE MODE'S *BLACK CELEBRATION* RETAINED THE SONIC REVELATION THAT HAD MADE SYNTH-POP SO THRILLING, HARKING BACK TO KALEIDOSCOPIC MASTERPIECES SUCH AS *SULK BY* THE ASSOCIATES

"A taut muscularity, rock dynamics made by machines, sprinkled with repetitive motifs" – Dave Gahan of Depeche Mode in 1988

© Ron Bull/Toronto Star via Getty Images

MUSIC YOU CAN DANCE TO

AS THE DANCE/POP DIVIDE CRUMBLED, MUSIC FOR THE HEART AND BEATS FOR THE FEET BECAME INEXTRICABLY TANGLED…

Most early synth-poppers were disco-loving night-clubbers. Martyn Ware loved Moroder/Donna Summer records, that 'Studio 54' sound devoured on imports; he went to Northern Soul nights, as did Dave Ball. Ball's bandmate Marc Almond checked coats at Leeds' Warehouse. Joanne Catherall and Susanne Sulley from the revamped Human League were even recruited on the dance-floors of Sheffield. Down south, at London's Blitz, Visage members were on the door (Steve Strange) or in the DJ booth (Rusty Egan).

Early dance music, specifically that of black America, loved synth-pop (Erasure's Andy Bell recalls how amazing monophonic synth-pop sounded through nightclub speakers). Afrika Bambataa sampled Kraftwerk on *Planet Rock*; The Fall's Mark E Smith witnessed Gary Numan-listening break-dancers in the US; Techno's Derrick May made loops of Depeche Mode; and Larry Levan played Yazoo at the Paradise Garage (legend has it that an impressed Trevor Horn immediately left and did the monumental *Relax* remix).

Soft Cell's *Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing* and The League's *Love And Dancing* broke pop ground as early remix albums. These extended dancefloor-ready cuts, as with Duran Duran's Night versions, were a throwback to disco remix pioneers (Tom Moulton, Walter Gibbons) but also sent the remix 'overground'. Becoming a mandatory format for virtually everyone in the 80s, remixed AOR acts got a hard electronic edge – Trevor Horn's deconstruction-remix of Yes' *Owner Of A Lonely Heart*, or Hall and Oates' extended *Out Of Touch*. The remix almost acts as a surviving strand of synth-pop in this period, sequencers and synths pushed way higher in the mix than their originals. Everything from Madonna's *Open Your Heart*, Fleetwood Mac's *Little Lies* or Foreigner's *Yesterday* were synth-poppified in the process. Late 80s remix albums include Heaven 17's *Endless* (1986) and Madonna's '87 *You Can Dance*.

Others – including Vince Clarke's former band and Mute labelmates – embraced the darkness. On 1986's *Black Celebration* Depeche Mode retained the air of sonic revelation that had made synth-pop so thrilling in the first place. Working with producer Gareth Jones, whose synth-pop credentials go back to John Foxx's *Metamatic* and label boss Daniel Miller, *Black Celebration* harked back to kaleidoscopic synth-heavy masterpieces (The Associates' *Sulk*) and then flashed forward. Depeche's clanging metallic samples had an industrial wallop (see also PSB's *Opportunities*). A defiantly left-field release ("no hit singles" moaned the label), it found them a growing US audience. For 1988's *Music For The Masses* they'd achieved a taut muscularity, rock dynamics made by machines, sprinkled with repetitive motifs influenced by modern composers – Michael Nyman, certainly Phillip Glass. They ended the decade with a sell-out US tour of 1988 with a show in Pasadena captured on the documentary *101* (supported by a fragmenting OMD).

As the decade drew to a close, synth-pop's place in popular music remained as contradictory as it had been throughout the mid-80s. Many had ditched it. Tears For Fears took four years to follow up *Songs From The Big Chair* with *The Seeds Of Love*, with 60s nostalgia (again) and jazzy muso chops that owed more to Steely Dan than Soft Cell. Similarly, Talk Talk on 1988's *Spirit Of Eden* pursued again jazzier, organic territory. Bowie, one of synth-pop's godfathers, was now in Tin Machine, acting like just another boy in a guitar band. Even Madonna, whose 1983 debut had sounded at points somewhat akin to Soft Cell or ABC with the orchestrations wiped off, made *Like A Prayer*, her rootsiest collection yet.

Then again, Morrissey – who once said the synth should be symbolically burned – was adding weird Eno-type electronics to *Last Of the International Playboys*, while Johnny Marr teamed up with Bernard Sumner to form the electro-rock hybrid Electronic. The following year he'd play on PSB's *Behaviour*. Everything was still merging and morphing. As the 80s ended and the 90s began, a series of 'post-synth' masterpieces were produced. On 1989's *Technique*, Erasure's *Wild!* and the following year's *Violator* by Depeche Mode and PSB's *Behaviour*, the music expands, taking in orchestrations and delicate guitar lines (Depeche's *Enjoy The Silence*, PSB's *End Of The World*) and also contracts, shrinking back to minimal principles (Erasure's Bell describes 1989's *You Surround Me* as their purest synth-pop moment, while PSB worked with Harold Faltermeyer).

Synth-pop struggled in the 90s. In that decade, Erasure's Andy Bell told me, the duo felt like outsiders. Dance music finally overtook it, becoming bifurcated largely by faceless boffins and novelty fodder, a divide synth-pop bridged. But it would survive. After all, it was part of a culture that was endlessly recycling and eating itself, just like that sampling machine. From then on, it would be 1981 forever somewhere in the pop stratosphere.

GODFATHERS of POP

DANIEL MILLER

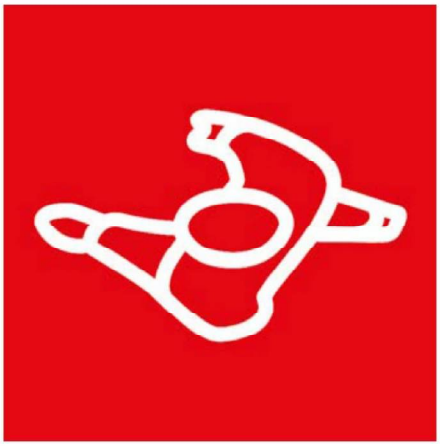
Daniel Miller is the founder of Mute Records, possibly the most 'synth-pop' of all labels as it has been the home of both Erasure and Depeche Mode. In the early days of the label, Miller also signed and supported dozens of other acts, some electronic, some unclassifiably experimental – Fad Gadget, D.A.F., Yazoo, NON/Boyd Rice, Liaisons Dangereuses, Duet Emmo and many others – as well as fronting his own project The Normal. Here he tries to pinpoint his personal Depeche Mode highlights, wrestles with the very definition of synth-pop, and we force him to reveal his favourite synth-pop track of all time…

You are the godfather of synth-pop! How does that feel?
Funny! I dunno. 'Godfather' sounds a bit gangstery to me…

Depeche Mode went on to take synth-pop to another level. Can you ever step back and try to sum up their incredible career?
It's hard to as I'm still, sort of, in the middle of it as, even though they are no longer on Mute, I still work with the guys. It's remarkable, really. But it's also *not* remarkable because what they are doing is amazing music, amazing performances and amazing productions – so from that point of view it isn't surprising. But I think the level that they have got to is beyond anybody's imagination or expectations. They've been written off so many times, especially in the UK, and to get to where they have got to is an incredible testament to their talent and hard work.

Tell us about the deal you did with Depeche Mode. We heard once that it was written on the back of a napkin. Can you clear that one up?
I can – it was not written anywhere, not even on the back of a napkin. I wouldn't even call it a 'deal' really. It was more like just an arrangement that I had with all of the artists I was working with at the time. When I started working with Depeche I'd already started with Fad Gadget, Robert Rental and Boyd Rice and everybody was on the same arrangement which was a 50/50 profit share, one record at a time, and that was it. Keep it simple.

You've just mentioned a lot of more experimental artists which Mute was well known for, but Depeche Mode were very much 'pop' – at least at the start...
I feel the early days of Depeche was pretty experimental, actually, even though the sounds and the techniques we were using



were in the pop context. It got more so as time went on but even at the beginning with [Depeche Mode debut album] *Speak & Spell* there weren't that many people doing things like that.

What was your overall philosophy with Mute when you started?
One of the reasons I started was evangelising the possibilities of electronic music – that it was a much more democratic form of music compared to traditional guitar/bass/drums, because all you needed was one synthesiser. You didn't have to have any musical ability; in fact the less ability you have and the more imagination brings out the best results. I'm still a big fan of electronic music. There is a lot of great electronic music out there, although there is a lot of really average music of all kinds too.

What is your favourite Depeche Mode album and song?
They are all my favourites.

Can you pinpoint any one?
Not really, as I was so emotionally attached to the whole project. I could look at [first single] *Dreaming Of Me* and say "that was groundbreaking" or I could look at *Personal Jesus* or any of these tracks. They have had so many landmarks in their career that I love. I find it hard to look at it objectively, especially the records that I worked closely with them on, the first five albums. Every sound that I hear and every note that is played, I remember an argument or I remember a laugh so it's so hard for me to look at it purely as a piece of music. Obviously it resonates with me in so many different ways, on an emotional level, on a nostalgic level, triggering lots of memories about the making of it. Some tracks were very hard to do but sound fun and great, and some tracks were really easy to do but maybe haven't stood the test of time, but I could never pinpoint one.

OK, what is the finest synth-pop song of all time, one that you wished Mute had released?
What is synth-pop? Where are the guide lines? It's hard to say, but I really liked the first version of [The Human League's] *Being Boiled*, so let's narrow it down to that era. So I could talk about every Kraftwerk track, although we did reissue Kraftwerk when we were part of EMI so technically they were part of Mute for the reissue – so I'll discount Kraftwerk! So maybe *Being Boiled*, or maybe a few tracks by a band called Hardcore. They were great and I did work with them in the studio for a bit but they slipped through my net somehow on the label. It's hard to say – The The, Soft Cell, any of those… **Andy Jones**

Daniel Miller – recording artist, producer, fearless record label head, DJ and grounding point for a host of electronic experimenters

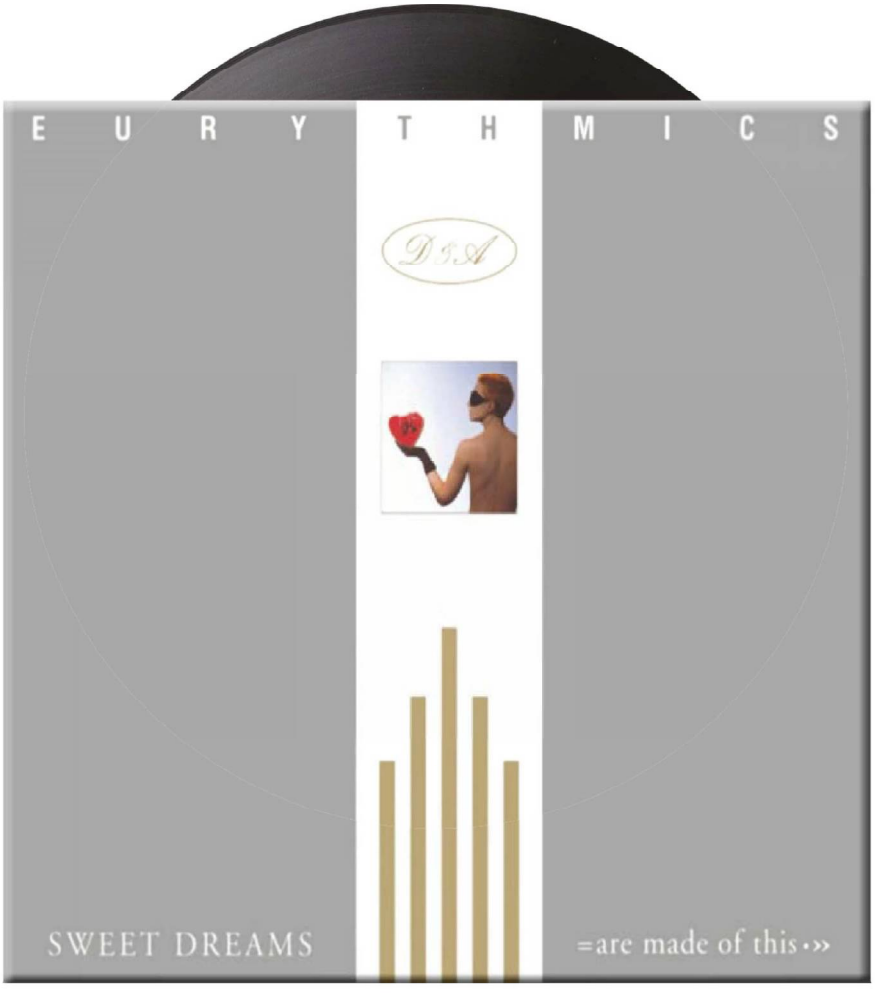
CLASSIC ALBUM

SWEET DREAMS (ARE MADE OF THIS)

EURYTHMICS

AFTER PLAYING SECOND FIDDLES IN THE TOURISTS, DAVE STEWART AND ANNIE LENNOX REGROUPED AND SET ABOUT ESTABLISHING A NEW ELECTRONIC PALETTE WITH EURYTHMICS. BUT IT WAS ONLY WITH THE SECOND ALBUM THAT THE WORLD REALISED THAT HERE WAS SOMETHING REMARKABLE…

MARK LINDORES



She was working as a waitress, not in a cocktail bar, but in a London restaurant when Dave Stewart first met Annie Lennox. Soon, the pair became inseparable as both lovers and members of pop outfit The Tourists. Their time in the band, formerly known as The Catch, proved to be a frustrating experience, with no creative input into the group's direction. When the collective imploded, Lennox and Stewart decided to continue on their own as Eurythmics, and signed to RCA Records.

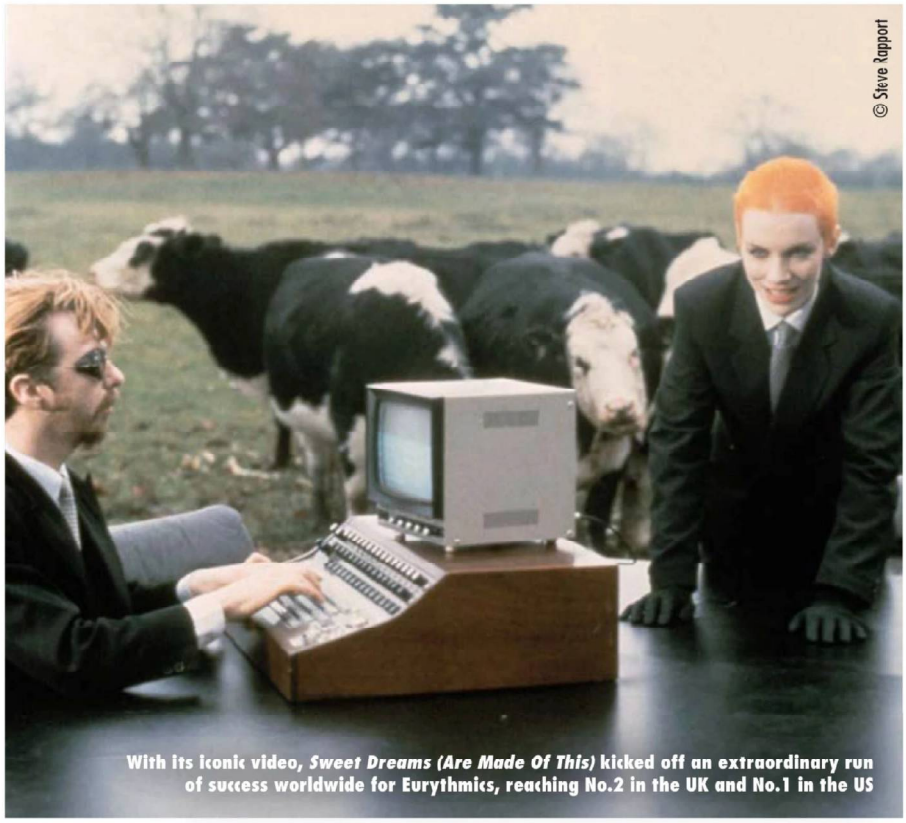
Though Lennox and Stewart decided to end their personal relationship, the duo would go on to release their debut album, 1981's *In The Garden*. The record revealed a band struggling to find its own musical identity. With the band failing to establish a fanbase, it was not a commercial success. After crisis talks with their label, Stewart was so convinced Eurythmics were on the cusp of success that he managed to secure a personal bank loan to finance a second album.

In 1982, they started from scratch. Unable to afford time in a studio, they rented a room above a picture framing shop in London's Chalk Farm, where they ensconced themselves with a range of synthesisers and samplers to devise a new sound. "On *In The Garden* we'd been to Germany to record with Conny Plank, and we'd come across something which was underground, electronic and odd, and that'd left a really big impression on us," Stewart says. "So when we came back to England, we had this sound that very much had its roots in Germany and we added that to our English pop sensibility.

"That was how we came up with the *Sweet Dreams* ethos – cold, European, hard, tough-sounding synthesisers with a soulful voice. I had decided to put the guitar down and try something I didn't know how to play. Keyboards were alien to me, and I thought something new would come out through that."

Without the constraints of studio time, the duo experienced a major boost in creativity. "We wanted control over what we were doing, rather than a team of people coming in and telling us what they thought we should be doing," Lennox told the BBC in 2009. "We were really inspired by the notion of being able to do everything ourselves, because technology had come down in price and size and we could literally record in one room.

"That was as significant then as what the internet is today, because up until that point, things weren't affordable and we'd have to go into a recording studio and be constantly looking at the clock and aware of huge amounts of money literally ticking away. Whereas with a little synthesiser, a drum machine and other little bits of equipment, we were free to experiment for as long as we liked and try new things."



With its iconic video, *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* kicked off an extraordinary run of success worldwide for Eurythmics, reaching No.2 in the UK and No.1 in the US

"One of the main things we learned from our time in The Tourists was that we wanted to record ourselves," Stewart says. "It's easy to be shy and afraid to say what you think to producers and engineers about how you think things should sound. So, we were clear early on from starting Eurythmics that we wanted to turn the knobs ourselves and experiment and see what happened. I was messing about with synthesisers, a sequencer and a four-track cassette recorder, and I experimented, making these icy cold, soulful synthesised backing tracks, and that's how things like *The Walk* came about."

Unlike previous experiences in the studio, both in The Tourists and on *In The Garden*, the sessions for what would become the *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* album were laidback, stress-free and fruitful, helping the duo establish the musical rapport they would revert to for the remainder of their time as Eurythmics.

Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This) shaped the direction of the rest of the songs on the album. Now Eurythmics were on a creative roll, using the sparse electronics as a foundation on which they added stabs of brass, multi-tracked vocals and synthesised soundscapes. As they continued working throughout 1982, *This Is The House* and *The Walk* were released as singles, though both failed to reach the Top 40, unsurprising as they received little promotion outside of their gigs.

A glimmer of hope arrived with the release of their fifth single, *Love Is A Stranger* in November 1982, which crept into the charts at No.54. Although its chart position was a disappointment, the song had benefitted from being released with a striking video, alerting Stewart and Lennox to the power of an exciting new medium.

"I was just like a kid with a paintbox," Annie recalls. "At first, I didn't get the concept of videos and didn't really understand what they were all about, but once I grasped it, it was so exciting. All of a sudden, we had the control and the means to make these mini movies, and

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 4 January 1983

LABEL RCA

PRODUCED BY
David A Stewart, Adam Williams and Robert Crash

ENGINEER David A Stewart

RECORDED AT
Eurythmics' eight-track studio and The Church, London

PERSONNEL
Annie Lennox – vocals, keyboards, synthesiser, flute; David A. Stewart – guitar, keyboards, synthesiser, programming, backing vocals; Robert Crash – guitar, e-drums, synthesiser, robotic vocals; Green Gartside – guest vocal duet on *Wrap it Up*; Dick Cuthell – trumpet; Adam Williams – bass guitar, synthesiser; Andy Brown – bass guitar; Reynard Falconer – synthesiser; John Turnbull – guitar

TRACK BY TRACK

1 LOVE IS A STRANGER

During the genesis of the *Sweet Dreams...* album Stewart and Lennox were still finding their way around recording with electronic instruments such as keyboards, samplers and drum machines, yet they soon found that the new technology was also informing their songwriting, both lyrically and structurally. Both *Love Is A Stranger* and *Sweet Dreams* in fact lack traditional 'choruses'.

Based on a simple drum pattern with an eerie short riff, *Love Is A Stranger* is driven by Annie's vocal, which veers effortlessly from the sinister description of the dangerous, destructive and overpowering effects love can have before the almost timid, broken refrain of "And I want you, so it's an obsession".

Released as Eurythmics' fifth single in November 1982, the single peaked at a disappointing No.54. Following their big breakthrough, it was re-released five months later and became their second Top 10 hit, reaching No.6.

2 I'VE GOT AN ANGEL

According to Dave Stewart, he and Annie experienced a creative boom while recording the album. A fine example of how innovative their output was during the sessions was *I've Got An Angel*. Approximately five years ahead of its time, the tribal beat, yelps, prominent synths and euphoric refrain of "I've got an angel" could easily have been the soundtrack to a sweaty warehouse party or a club in Ibiza during the early days of the rave scene.

3 WRAP IT UP

A radical reworking of Sam & Dave's 1968 hit, *Wrap It Up* is reimagined as a dance-inflected, electro track, which amps up the funk aspect of the song. Annie's voice is complemented by guest vocals from Scritti Politti's frontman Green Gartside.

4 I COULD GIVE YOU (A MIRROR)

While the name and sentiment of the track owe a debt to The Velvet Underground and Nico's *I'll Be Your Mirror*, the execution is pure synth-pop. The dance beat and irresistible synths bring to mind that other duo that blended electronica with a red-haired diva with a killer voice – Yazoo.

5 THE WALK

Almost certainly the greatest Eurythmics hit that never was, *The Walk* is an early highlight of their discography, with a deceptively simple electronic backing track that supports an ensuing cavalcade of musical ideas. The duo experimented with distorting tracks to such an extent that Annie sounds almost male at certain points – a sound matching her androgynous appearance.

Produced by Dave Stewart, *The Walk* featured their collaborator Adam Williams, a former member of The Selecter, on bass, and incorporates a brass fanfare and a saxophone solo to further stamp its avant-garde credentials.

Though it failed to make an impact on the singles chart, *The Walk* would have undoubtedly given Eurythmics another big hit had it been released after *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* and *Love Is A Stranger* had provided the breakthrough. However, the prolific duo had already started work on their *Touch* album and were keen to release new material.

6 SWEET DREAMS (ARE MADE OF THIS)

As is the case with many songs that embed themselves into our brains and become classics, *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* was an exercise in spontaneity which surfaced within a matter of hours.

Writing about the composition of the track in his autobiography, Dave Stewart recalled that he had been experimenting with a new drum machine, an MCS Percussion Computer, bought at vast expense. Struggling with its controls, which seemed to do the opposite of what he intended, Stewart ended up with an unexpected "low thud" bass drum. Awakened from the next room, Lennox joined in with Dave's accompanying keyboard part using a favourite string preset on an Oberheim OB-X. With the track complete, Annie returned to her room and wrote the lyrics within an hour. "The song was an expression of how I felt," she said. "Hopeless and nihilistic."

Feeling the song was too dark, Dave added the "Hold your head up, moving on/ Keep your head up, moving on" lyric as a mantra to lighten it (whenever they play the song live, they always end on that part as a statement of hope).

The combination of the song and its iconic video kicked off an extraordinary run of success worldwide for Stewart and Lennox, and it reached No.2 in the UK and No.1 in the US.

because we shot them on a shoestring budget we had to be imaginative and innovative. It was fantastic."

Adopting a DIY ethos, the duo indulged their love of abstract art and art-house cinema, ensuring their promos would stand out from the more straightforward, performance-based clips common at the time. "We approached it in a surrealistic filmmaker's way, and that was what broke America for us," Stewart explains. "MTV had just started and all these videos would be on, then *Sweet Dreams* would come on with me and Annie with a cow... there'd be some farmer in Texas watching, thinking: 'What the hell is going on here?' It was really unusual for the time. A lot of people had assumed Annie was black, particularly in America, until we arrived and they were shocked and stunned to discover she was a skinny white girl. That's what came to define us."

Released as a single, *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* was make-or-break for Eurythmics. After three underperforming releases, the label didn't want to release a fourth, let alone one with an unconventional structure. Feeling that the song would be a hit, based on how organically it had been written and recorded, Dave and Annie persuaded RCA to put it out in January 1983. Boosted by strong radio support and heavy rotation of the video, which featured a sharp-suited Lennox with close-cropped orange hair, the song gave the duo the breakthrough hit. The single reached No.2 in the UK and helped propel the album to No.3.

Lennox's empowered look helped her become the poster girl for the new wave of pansexual pop stars bringing androgyny to the mainstream. Alongside the likes of Boy George and Grace Jones, she was celebrated in style bibles such as *The Face*, *i-D* and *Blitz*. She was thrilled to be featured on the cover of *Newsweek* in the US alongside the Culture Club frontman, as it gave her the opportunity to explain that her striking image extended beyond a mere fashion statement. "I felt that by wearing a man's suit, standing beside Dave and cutting my hair in an aggressive way, that I was making a statement about being equal to a man," she says. "I didn't want to be perceived as a sex object – there was more to me than that. I wanted to take the old clichéd tradition of female singers being sexy and pretty in a dress, passive and submissive, and do something with it. I decided I was prepared to go far with the exploration of persona and performance and music and see where that would go. I was prepared to go all the way with it, pushing it, because I felt that I had nothing to lose."

After *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* brought Eurythmics fame, they threw themselves into work on their next album. With their lo-fi approach meaning that they could write and record while on their Sweet Dreams Tour, they completed *Touch* in just three weeks and released it in November 1983.

One year after its release, the *Sweet Dreams* era reached a controversial conclusion when Annie took androgyny to the next level by performing at the 1984 Grammys in male drag, complete with Elvis-style quiff and sideburns to an audience already reeling from Boy George's announcement that America "knew a good drag queen when they saw one". While his proclamation dented Culture Club's career in the US, Eurythmics would go from strength to strength, achieving the kind of success that dreams are made of. ■

7 JENNIFER

The track opens with pulsing synths, and Annie's stunning vocal repeatedly asking of the whereabouts of Jennifer with her orange hair, green eyes and dress of deepest purple. As chimes tinkle, waves crash and the synths become insistent, it's revealed that she is mysteriously "underneath the water", although we never find out how she wound up there... but the seething guitar outro and haunting nature of the song evoke sinister circumstances.

8 THIS IS THE HOUSE

This Is The House begins with a Spanish passage meant to sound like a *Teach Yourself Spanish* cassette, recorded on the duo's eight-track home studio.

While the track reflects their transition into electronic-based pop, the song features a prominent bassline from Andy Brown and a trumpet on the chorus which sets it apart from other synth-based artists at the time. Dave Stewart pointed out that while the album is synthesiser-based, it also features sounds created on household items, including milk bottles and a plank of wood. The single, nevertheless, was commercially unsuccessful and failed to chart.

9 SOMEBODY TOLD ME

This slow-burner of a song features a spurned-sounding Lennox at its core. The singer vents over swirling synths about a lover that has done her wrong before the chorus reveals that "Somebody told me something about you". We are left wondering what she has discovered to leave her so bereft.

10 THIS CITY NEVER SLEEPS

Brooding and hypnotic, *This City Never Sleeps* borrows its title from the nickname given to New York, but was also inspired by Dave and Annie's time living in squats and a single room in a shared house. With its sampled noise of the London Underground, the track conveys the claustrophobic feeling of being constantly surrounded by people. Along with *Jennifer*, this song alerted film producers to Eurythmics' ability to create tension and atmosphere in their music, and saw them being offered film soundtracks and scores – an opportunity they seized with *1984*. This track achieved notoriety after it was featured prominently in a graphic scene starring Kim Basinger in *9½ Weeks*.

The *Sweet Dreams...* video introduced the world to Eurythmics and Annie Lennox's signature style

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

THIS IS THE HOUSE

During an early live performance, Annie was toying with different stage guises when an overzealous fan managed to get on stage and pulled off her wig. Furious, she shaved her hair into a buzzcut and decided to swap her dresses for men's suits in order to cultivate a tougher, more aggressive stage persona. This clip of *This Is The House* was filmed at London's Heaven nightclub alongside other album tracks that were released as the *Sweet Dreams* video album. **youtu.be/17y7vtsojMo**

THE WALK

Continuing their low-budget aesthetic, Dave and Annie recruited Marek Budzynski, a film student at London's College of Art, to shoot the promo for *The Walk*. It was never released; the original footage went missing, and the only existing backup VHS copy belonged to the director, who posted it on YouTube in 2007. Video editor Sophie Muller would go on to direct an incredible series of videos for *Savage* and work with Annie on her *Diva* project. **youtu.be/TQGmgrR5hSE**

LOVE IS A STRANGER

Directed by Mike Brady, *Love Is A Stranger* is one of Eurythmics' earliest and most disturbing videos. It begins with Annie as a high-class prostitute and Dave as her chauffeur. As she is driven to meet her clients, she transforms into a number of guises which defy gender and reference various sexual subcultures and fetishes. The scene where Annie pulls off her wig got the video pulled mid-broadcast during its US premiere after MTV assumed she was a transvestite. **youtu.be/o6f593X6rv8**

SWEET DREAMS (ARE MADE OF THIS)

Directed by Dean Karr and Chris Ashbrook, *Sweet Dreams* used three locations – a boardroom, a field, and a boat on a river. Inspired by surrealist painter Salvador Dali and underground cinema, the video was intended to set Eurythmics apart from other mainstream acts. Mission accomplished: its bizarre concept highlights how humans are driven by success, achievement and approval, while the cow is content in itself and doesn't require any stimuli. **youtu.be/qeMFqkcPYcg**

GODFATHERS of POP

MARTYN WARE

As one of the original members of both The Human League and then Heaven 17, Martyn Ware of British Electric Foundation is one of the founding fathers of UK synth-pop. Here he tells *Classic Pop* about the early Sheffield scene, getting signed, struggles with technology, the fraught move from one band to another, and the hook-up with an unexpected singer…

How did you initially become aware of synth-based music?
Back in the day, people like the [BBC] Radiophonic Workshop – who I worked with recently – were using synthesisers, but a lot of what they did was concerned with tape manipulation. Our definition of a 'synthesiser band' was only creating by using synthesisers… and then doing a bit of tape manipulation, speeding tape up, micro-editing, stuff like that.

Back then Sheffield would get called the biggest village in Britain, and lots of musicians and like-minded people were hanging out in similar pubs. We'd faked Student Union ID cards to go and see bands at Sheffield University. At that time, our mentors were Cabaret Voltaire. Their approach to music wasn't something we wanted to impersonate, though. It was a bit too chaotic for our taste. We were more fans of glam and, let's say, future-facing music. So we'd always search out music that had synthesisers on, just as consumers, before we even considered being in a band… like being in the space age, and looking towards the future as an optimistic time. I wanted to get involved, but couldn't play any instruments. As soon as I got some money I started looking at buying things on hire purchase. The first thing I bought was a Stylophone… which I thought made me Brian Eno!

Then one day Ian Craig Marsh turned up and he'd built a synthesiser in a black-painted plywood box, with lots of switches and lights. I thought: "This is fantastic!" It had a joystick, which was all that was required, really! We were influenced by Eno and Roxy Music and Van der Graaf Generator, but as consumers. We didn't think anybody would take us seriously. We were just doing it for a laugh.

We started renting a cheap ex-industrial property in the centre of Sheffield that we called The Workshop… we thought we were like Andy Warhol! It was horrible and mucky. I'd bought a Korg 700, Ian had bought a Roland System 100, and that's when we started doing things a bit more seriously. Both of those machines I still have and still use. I took the Korg 700 with me on the latest Heaven 17 tour. It was very impressive for people!

We formed a band called The Future and we got lots of [record company] appointments in London, just by sending them messages saying "We are the future of music!" They all sent us away, saying it was a pile of rubbish… apart from Virgin and Island, who both spent some time encouraging us and said that we ought to go away and write some proper songs, rather than soundscapes.

We'd made some early demos on a friend's four-track machine. We thought we were The Beatles! We went back to Sheffield and immediately sacked [original vocalist] Adi Newton. Fast-forward a few months, and we'd written some demos.

British Electric Foundation's 2013 album *Music Of Quality And Distinction Vol. 3: Dark* follows on from 1982's *Vol. 1* and 1991's *Vol. 2* with a range of guest vocalists on 14 eclectic covers

Had you tried to enlist a drummer at all at this point?
No, no, no. The premise of all this was it was purely electronic. That was the rule. All the actual sounds had to be generated electronically. There were no drum machines or MIDI. We couldn't afford a Revox tape recorder because they were £700, so we got an equivalent, a Sony, which was £250. We paid for all these things on hire purchase and we started doing sound-on-sound. We didn't have a multi-track, we didn't have a mixer; all we had was an SM58 microphone, two synthesisers and a two-track tape machine. That's how we created *Being Boiled*. My friend Paul Bower of the band 2.3, who were signed to Fast Records, a punk label in Edinburgh, heard it and asked if we minded him sending our tape to Bob Last, who ran the label. We sent it, and the next thing we know, it's coming out on Fast Products. John Peel's playing it, and it's sold 5,000 copies. And then that's when Virgin signed us up.

Where did The Human League's name come from?
A strategy board game called *Star Force. One* of the scenarios was called 'The Rise Of The Human League'.

Glenn Gregory was your original choice for vocalist, but as chance would have it he wasn't available.
He'd just moved down to London to find fame and fortune and ended up forming a band with the people who went on to become Huang Chung. Phil Oakey was my best friend at school. Me and him got on like a house on fire… we were both mavericks. We didn't know if he could sing but he looked good, so we gave him the backing tracks for *Being Boiled* and told him to go away and write something for them. He came back with the first few lines, and the rest is history.

Martyn Ware and Glenn Gregory of Heaven 17 toured *The Luxury Gap* with much added material in 2018, and plans for 2019 include supporting Squeeze

The Human League was fired from playing tour support for Talking Heads because you wanted to sit in the audience rather than be up on stage. What was that about?
We were big fans of Kraftwerk. They'd just done a series of gigs where they weren't on stage but just had robots in their place. We thought we'd go one stage further. We'd already got a slide show to what we were doing on stage behind us, and we guaranteed we'd actually be in the audience, and go round and talk to them. We liked the idea of breaking the Fourth Wall. The artist is no better than the audience! A guiding principle for everything we've done, including Heaven 17's Unique Experiences, which occur in real time. But you have to be there, and it becomes legendary. We wanted people to understand it's an artistic enterprise.

Why did The Human League split?
Nothing to do with me, I assure you! I turned up and was told I was being thrown out of the band. Not gonna happen. It's my band… mine and Ian's band, anyway. We were the ones that brought Phil in. Bob Last and the record company [Virgin] had been machinating behind the scenes to split the band so they could make Phil into a more traditional pop star, and get two bands for the price of one. The strategy worked perfectly. Bob Last had already arranged for Jo Callis – who is a great songwriter and his best friend from Edinburgh – and [bass player] Ian Burden, with Martin Rushent producing. This was all in advance of chucking me out. The story was "Oh, poor Phil, it's just him and the two dancers. How's he going to survive!?" It was like a *Jeopardy* moment with a reveal! If you deduct Jo Callis and Martin Rushent from that equation, there's no way *Dare* would have been a commercial success. It would have been interesting, Phil is a really good top-line writer. But at that time didn't have much experience of writing the structure of a song. He's a great lyricist. He didn't write all the lyrics, though; for the first two albums we wrote together. For some reason, Adrian [Wright] started playing synthesiser. What was all that about? He had no musical talent. It was like set-dressing. The guy was a full-time member of The Human League as a visualist!

You and Ian then formed Heaven 17 with Glenn Gregory as vocalist, and also the British Electric Foundation with guest singers including Sandie Shaw, Billy Mackenzie and Paul Jones…
There was another element to this masterplan that Bob Last had. He thought that Ian and my talents lay in the studio, that we should have a production company and sign to Virgin. I really liked that idea! We had a brainstorming session with Virgin. I said I wanted a lot of famous vocalists, and they helped me find the contact details.

As a non-singer, Paula Yates was a surprising choice…
I thought, wouldn't it be nice to have someone who hadn't sung before and was… unexpected. We wanted the album to be a manifesto of electronic pop and soul, and for people to be surprised by who we had doing it. Paula certainly fulfilled that! She was a coquette… and you couldn't get more of a coquettish song than *These Boots Are Made For Walking*!
Ian Ravendale

CLASSIC ALBUM

ACTUALLY

PET SHOP BOYS

CLEVERLY REFINING THE ART OF CARRYING SUBVERSION INTO THE MAINSTREAM, PET SHOP BOYS' THIRD ALBUM PROVED THAT THEY WERE NO HERE-TODAY-GONE-TOMORROW CHART ACT, CEMENTING THEIR PLAQUE ON POP'S WALL OF FAME AND PROMPTLY GOING TRIPLE-PLATINUM...

OLIVER HURLEY

All the signs were there: Pet Shop Boys were a one-hit wonder. *West End Girls,* released in October 1985, spent 17 weeks in the UK Top 40 and topped the charts for two. Thanks to the group's peculiar name and the oddness of the song itself, it seemed like an archetypal one-off hit. The two singles that followed from the Pet Shop Boys' debut album, *Please – Love Comes Quickly* and *Opportunities (Let's Make Lots Of Money)* – both failed to crack the Top 10. "I wondered whether we'd ever achieve anything like it again," admitted Neil Tennant in the 2006 documentary *Pet Shop Boys: A Life In Pop.* "I didn't feel hugely confident." Despite Tennant's lack of certainty the Pet Shop Boys did go on to score a further Top 10 in October 1986 with *Suburbia.*

However, Tennant and fellow Pet Shop Boy Chris Lowe had a wealth of material, having spent lengthy periods at a little studio in Murray Street, Camden. By the time they signed with Parlophone in 1985 they had enough songs for at least two albums, and in between *Please* promo duties they would write even more.

If *Please* was Pet Shop Boys' mission statement, *Actually* consolidated their sound and aesthetic: massive synth hooks at once uplifting and melancholic, creative arrangements, thoughtful and unusual lyrics that avoided cliché, all presented with a mild disinterest, as if this pop juggernaut wasn't really anything to do with them.

They chose to record the album in London studios Advision and Trevor Horn's Sarm West – which, according to Lowe, let them experiment and "faff a lot". A number of producers were selected, notably Stephen Hague, who had produced *Please,* and Julian Mendelsohn, who had produced the re-recorded single version of *Suburbia.* Mendelsohn's biggest impact on *Actually* was his work on *It's A Sin,* the album's centrepiece; the song had existed for years – along with *Rent* and *West End Girls,* it was on a demo when they signed with Parlophone, and there were plans to record it for *Please* with Stock, Aitken and Waterman, but Waterman didn't like it.

"When I was writing the lyrics, I sort of meant it as a joke," explained Tennant during his 2007 appearance on *Desert Island Discs.* "I guess it just came from my subconscious that, when we were at school, we always seemed to be taught that everything you wanted to do was a sin. It was an early example of the Pet Shop Boys trying to bring a different kind of subject matter into pop music."

The use of real sounds under the music gives it a filmic quality, and Mendelsohn even went as far as to include a recording of the 'ambience' from inside a 19th-century church in Knightsbridge. "We went to the Brompton Oratory to record some live effects on a little two-track Nagra tape recorder, and that's on the record somewhere," he says (you can hear it in the "Father forgive me" section). "I know Neil and Chris wanted it to be completely over the top. At the time I was making that track, I was listening to a lot of ZZ Top. So I sort of sent it in that direction a little bit – the insistent heaviness of it."

© Mike Prior/Getty Images

Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe formed Pet Shop Boys in 1981 and have gone on to be the most successful duo in UK music history

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 7 September 1987

LABEL Parlophone

PRODUCED BY
Stephen Hague, David Jacob, Andy Richards, Shep Pettibone, Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe

ENGINEERS
David Jacob, Dave Meegan, Tony Philips and Julian Mendelsohn

RECORDED AT
Sarm West and Advision Studios

PERSONNEL
Neil Tennant – vocals, keyboards; Chris Lowe – keyboards, vocals; Andy Richards – Fairlight CMI and keyboard programming on tracks 1, 4, 5, 7 and 9; Dusty Springfield – vocals on track 2; J. J. Jeczalik – Fairlight CMI programming on track 3; Gary Maughan – additional programming on track 3; Angelo Badalamenti – orchestra arrangement on track 6; Blue Weaver – Fairlight CMI programming on track 6; Adrian Cook – programming on track 8

Released as a single in June 1987, *It's A Sin* spent three weeks at No.1 and, along with *West End Girls* and their 1993 cover version of the Village People's *Go West,* is today one of the Pet Shop Boys' most recognisable moments.

The recording of *Actually* was fairly structured. The day would start at about 10am or 11am and Mendelsohn says he would be in the studio for anywhere from 10 to 14 hours at a time. "Neil and Chris would leave the studio at about seven or eight o'clock and then me and [keyboard programmer] Andy [Richards] would muck around until one or two in the morning. They'd come back with fresh ears the next day and say, 'Yep, that's really great,' or, 'That's crap, now you've got to work on that.' That's pretty much how it went."

Mendelsohn's abiding memory is that he and Tennant "did a lot of the hands-on work" while Lowe would lie on the couch at the back of the control room, chipping in with suggestions. Sometimes an extra keyboard line would be needed: "He'd get up, he'd have a keyboard and he'd fiddle about for a couple of minutes," says Mendelsohn. "And he'd put the machine into record, he'd do the line and that was it, he'd go back to the couch. And it was always a winner. You'd think, 'How the hell does he do that?' Most of the keyboard lines that you hear in a gap, he would have just knocked together."

There was no great ceremony when it came to recording the vocals, either. "You used to just go in and say, 'Oh, we'd better do the vocal on this,'" says Mendelsohn. "It was always good to get them done before dinner because, once we'd had dinner, it never seemed to work.

TRACK BY TRACK

1 ONE MORE CHANCE

Actually opens with what was conceived as a 12" remix, highlighting the influence at the time of house music on the duo. It was co-written before the release of *Please* with Bobby Orlando, with whom the group had a production and management deal (it started life as the backing track of an unfinished Divine song). The commercial failure of the original version of the song (it was released in America and Belgium in 1984) prompted Pet Shop Boys to extricate themselves from their contract with Orlando, at a cost of $1 million. Compared to the later tracks on the album, this is spare and understated – an amuse-bouche for what's to come.

2 WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS?

This duet with Dusty Springfield was co-written at the start of 1985 with Allee Willis (who subsequently co-wrote the theme from *Friends*) at the suggestion of PSB manager Tom Watkins. The peculiar structure reflects the way it was composed: Lowe wrote the riff and the music for the "I bought you drinks, I bought you flowers" section; Tennant came up with the verse; and Willis wrote the "Since you went away" part. The lyrics – about an old couple who regret splitting up – are mostly by Tennant, who wrote them on the number 22 bus on his way home from his job at *Smash Hits*.

3 SHOPPING

This started as a joke: Tennant and Lowe would walk down Oxford Street singing "S-H-O-P-P-I-N-G". But Tennant couldn't think of anything to say about the subject and the lyrics instead became about the government selling off nationalised industries ("I heard it in the House of Commons/ Everything's for sale"). Musically, it takes its cue from *Passion* by Bobby Orlando (in which the song's title is also spelled out in the chorus). The keyboard part at 2:06 is a tribute to the bass style of New Order's Peter Hook.

4 RENT

Although it is one of the Pet Shop Boys' most affecting songs, *Rent* was an unlikely choice as *Actually*'s third single – in contrast to the spirited nature of the preceding singles *It's A Sin* and *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, it is underpinned by a powerful sense of melancholy. It went through various metamorphoses, having started off in 1984 as a fast Hi-NRG song. "We realised we had too many of those," said Lowe, "so Andy Richards [the song's keyboard programmer] half-speeded it." Regarding the lyrical approach, Tennant informed *Q* magazine in 2005 that "I'd always thought that *Rent* was sung by a woman. It's a very English, theatrical style, rather than an authentic singer-songwriter approach."

5 HIT MUSIC

The Art of Noise's version of *Peter Gunn* (a TV theme composed by Henry Mancini) was the unlikely inspiration for this track; Tennant heard it in a New York club and began singing "hit music – on the radio" to it on the way home. In the sleevenotes for the 2001 reissue of *Actually*, Tennant also admits: "The 'I've been working hard all day to pay the bills I have to pay' line is a complete nick from the Abba song *Money, Money, Money*. It didn't occur to me until years afterwards." Its lengthy, half-speed outro sets the tone perfectly for the track that follows.

6 IT COULDN'T HAPPEN HERE

"I may be wrong, I thought we said/ It couldn't happen here" runs the chorus to this funereal, string-driven composition, which was inspired by a friend of Tennant's who was diagnosed with AIDS. The unmistakable arrangement comes courtesy of Angelo Badalamenti, with the strings recorded on a Fairlight synthesiser/sampler. The song's title was later recycled for the Pet Shop Boys' feature film, released in July 1988, which was directed by Jack Bond and co-starred Barbara Windsor, Joss Ackland and Gareth Hunt.

7 IT'S A SIN

It's A Sin – a gloriously overblown song about Catholic guilt – is the album's key track. At the behest of Tennant and Lowe, Julian Mendelsohn's production crams in everything from a thunderclap and a NASA countdown (which, admitted Tennant, is "entirely

"Neil had a great voice but there were always a few tuning problems, so you had to be quite hard on him. You did four or five takes and then compiled the best from each, and then you might have to do a few bits again and you'd pretty much got it."

The Pet Shop Boys needed a woman for a duet on *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* and – at the suggestion of Nikke Slight, who worked in the office of manager Tom Watkins – they asked Dusty Springfield, Neil's favourite female singer. "Dusty was, to us, a legend," Tennant said. "When we met her, she was living in a pay-by-day Hollywood motel. She was really at rock bottom. And it was just a sublime moment hearing her sing our music." Springfield had a meticulous plan for how she wanted her vocals to sound, and would record take after take. After she had finished in the studio, says Mendelsohn, "Neil had to go through it all and swap between each take. It was pretty painful." The song was released in August 1987 and reached No.2 – making it Dusty's highest-charting single since 1966's *You Don't Have To Say You Love Me*.

It was followed a month later by *Actually* (the title was simply a word the group said a lot). The album peaked at No.2 and sold more than four million copies.

With songs such as *Shopping* (about nationalised industries), *It Couldn't Happen Here* (addressing AIDS) and *King's Cross* (a metaphor for poverty in Eighties Britain), the album was received by critics as a statement about Thatcherism – something, Tennant has said: "Which didn't occur to us while we were making it."

Actually is the Pet Shop Boys' defining album, and its sleeve remains the defining image of the duo – to the chagrin of Lowe, who has said he hates how he looks in the photo. Both are dressed in black dinner jackets and bow ties. Lowe looks ahead dispassionately, while Tennant yawns. The initial idea had been to use a painting of the two by Scottish artist Alison Watt but they didn't think the finished portrait was right for the album. Tennant ended up hanging the painting in his flat.

The yawning photo, taken by Cindy Palmano on the set of the *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* video, was due to be used on the cover of an August 1987 edition of *Smash Hits* but was salvaged for the album sleeve the day before the magazine went to press. "It was sort of uncompromising and funny at the same time," said Tennant of the sleeve.

The non-album track *Always On My Mind* was released as a single in November 1987 and became that year's Christmas No.1. The Pet Shop Boys originally performed it on a Central TV special commemorating the 10th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. The single version was again recorded with Mendelsohn. "They'd started it at another studio as a demo and just bought it in," he says. "It was really quick. They came in at lunchtime, we had it finished by nine o'clock at night." The final single from *Actually*, *Heart*, was released in March 1988 and also reached No.1.

The Pet Shop Boys have gone on to sell more than 50 million records and have enjoyed 44 Top 40 UK singles, making them the most successful British music duo of all time. But the period around *Actually* marked the zenith of what Tennant often refers to as the group's 'imperial phase'. "We sort of did understand what the sound for contemporary pop in 1987 to 1988 was," the singer told Radio 2 in 2016, "because dance music's influence was very very strong, but we had this strange production thing that was like no one else.

"It just seemed to work at the time. There's a certain amount of luck in all this as well. But I think we had good songs and we had the confidence to follow our own instincts." ■

irrelevant") to a choir singing in Westminster Cathedral and Tennant reciting from a Catholic prayer book. It was written in the Camden demo studio that the duo used in their early days, and dates from 1982. Five years later it would become the best-selling European single of the year.

8 I WANT TO WAKE UP

Musically and lyrically (it's about unrequited love), this is pretty straightforward stuff compared to much of the rest of *Actually*, and it's the album's weakest song. Lowe composed the backing track, to which Tennant added the lyrics from a song he'd written before the two met, called *I Heard What You Said* (which became the opening line of *I Want To Wake Up*).

9 HEART

Tennant has admitted that *Heart* – which was No.1 for three weeks in April 1988 – is "actually pretty corny, but I think the words are quite sweet and sincere." The conceit is simply that it's a disco song: the beat of the record and the beat of your heart. The reason it begins with "beat, heartbeat" (as opposed to "heartbeat, heartbeat") is because Julian Mendelsohn accidentally wiped the start when he was mixing it. "But it all turned out good in the end," he says. "A lot of other artists would have had an absolute meltdown had it happened to them. But Neil and Chris said: 'Ah, let's just make it like it was supposed to be like that.'" This was initially planned as the lead single off *Actually* but Tom Watkins convinced them to release *It's A Sin* first.

10 KING'S CROSS

Named after the station you'd arrive at in London from north-east England (where Tennant grew up), this addresses the people left behind by Margaret Thatcher's Britain: "The man at the back of the queue was sent/ To feel the smack of firm government," it begins. Tennant considers *King's Cross* to be one of the best songs Pet Shop Boys have ever written, and the effect of the seemingly uplifting brass parts, the frequent switching between major and minor, and the unresolved narrative ("There's still no guarantee") combine to make this the album's most emotive moment.

© Michael Putland/Getty Images

Dusty Springfield with the Pet Shop Boys during the cover shoot for her *Nothing Has Been Proved* single recorded for the 1989 film *Scandal*

THE BIG PICTURE
THE VIDEOS

IT'S A SIN

All muted browns and greys, this is a nightmarish vision of a kind of medieval prison in which Tennant is held captive. Lowe is his jailer but is also imprisoned himself (the two share the same food). Every time Tennant sings the line "It's a sin", one of the seven deadly sins appears. At the end, Tennant is led to his execution. "We wanted it to look beautiful," said Tennant in the Pet Shop Boys book *Annually*, "so that every frame looked like a painting." **youtu.be/dRHetRTOD1Q**

WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS?

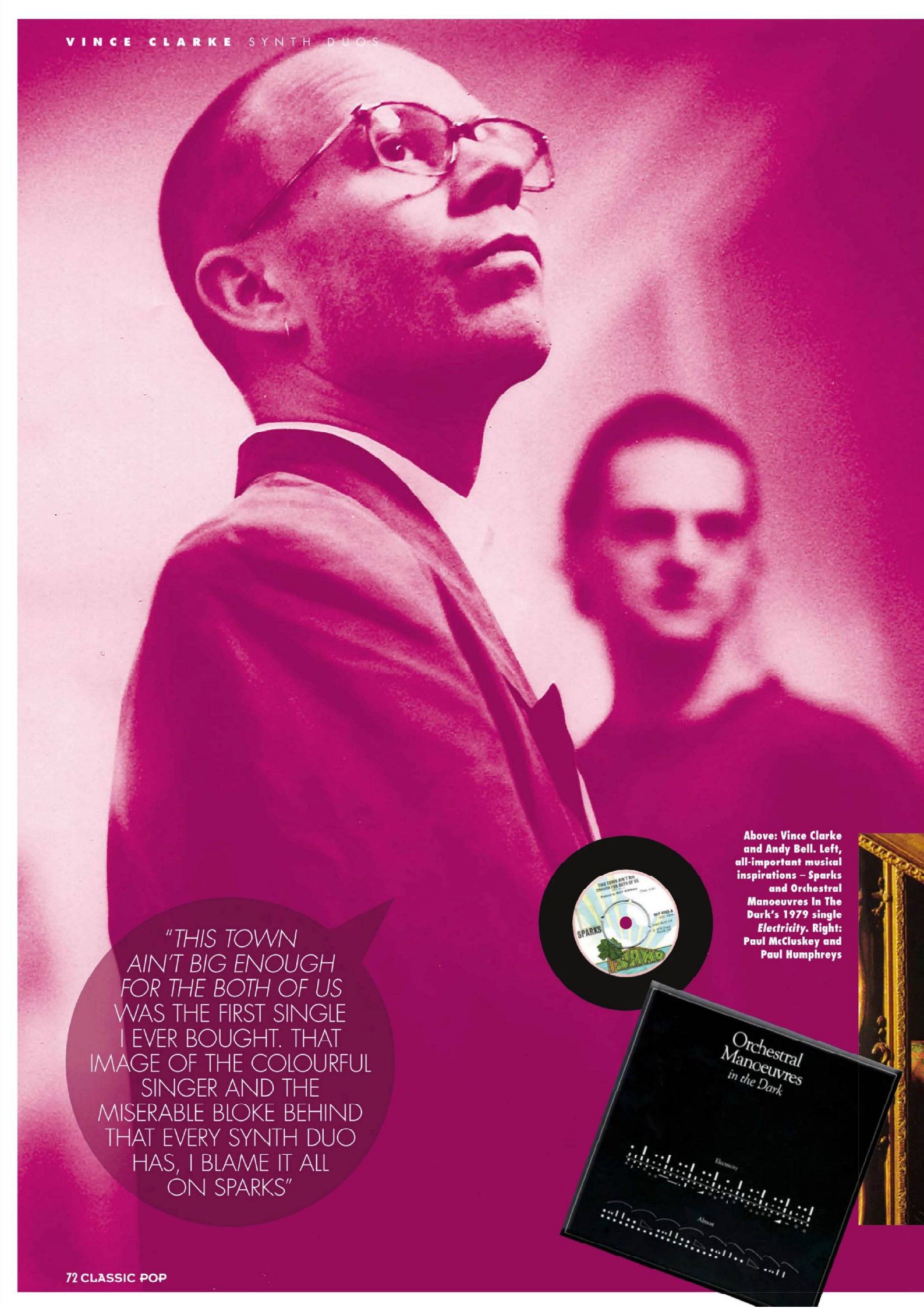
Set backstage in a theatre in the run-up to a performance, the duo are members of an orchestra that is about to play with Dusty. The showgirls' elaborate feather headdresses had in fact been used in the James Bond film *Octopussy*. The video's highlight is a brief dance routine performed by Lowe, which even includes a flying leap. The video ends with Springfield and various musicians on stage, while the tuxedo-clad Pet Shop Boys stand either side of her. **youtu.be/Wn9E5i7l-Eg**

RENT

Margi Clarke stars as a kept woman attending a dinner party hosted by her wealthy husband. After her husband continues to ignore her, she storms out and her chauffeur (Tennant) drives her to King's Cross station, where she plans to run away. Here, she meets a dressed-down Lowe. The video ends with the two embracing. In the 'limousine' section the plan was for a civil disturbance to be taking place outside but, Tennant says: "The budget wasn't big enough for rioting." **dai.ly/x22ww0**

HEART

Shot in what was then Yugoslavia, Lowe plays a chauffeur, driving Tennant and his bride to a castle on their wedding night. Inside, vampire Ian McKellen woos the bride before sinking his teeth into her neck. They ride off in a horse-drawn carriage, leaving a bereft Tennant looking on. "I thought Ian McKellen might be a sensitive, pale artiste type," Tennant told *Q* in 1988. "In fact, he was a real laugh. We were in fits the whole time." **youtu.be/wTkfK2g4pKI**



"THIS TOWN AIN'T BIG ENOUGH FOR THE BOTH OF US WAS THE FIRST SINGLE I EVER BOUGHT. THAT IMAGE OF THE COLOURFUL SINGER AND THE MISERABLE BLOKE BEHIND THAT EVERY SYNTH DUO HAS, I BLAME IT ALL ON SPARKS"

Above: Vince Clarke and Andy Bell. Left, all-important musical inspirations – Sparks and Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark's 1979 single *Electricity*. Right: Paul McCluskey and Paul Humphreys

STEREO SYSTEM

ONCE SPARKS SHOWED THE WAY, TRADITIONAL BANDS WERE DEAD AND DUOS TOOK OVER. FROM OMD TO HURTS VIA SOFT CELL, COMMUNARDS AND PET SHOP BOYS, THE CHARISMATIC FRONTMAN AND STERN SIDEKICK HAS PROVED AN IMMENSELY DURABLE FORMULA. WHO BETTER TO EXPLAIN WHY TWO IS THE MAGIC NUMBER THAN VINCE CLARKE? THE BOFFIN BEHIND YAZOO, ERASURE AND A HOST OF OTHER COUPLES REVEALS WHY HE'S BEEN ADDICTED TO DUOS EVER SINCE LEAVING DEPECHE MODE...

JOHN EARLS

Given that he's been one-half of no less than seven synth partnerships since leaving Depeche Mode in 1981, it's no surprise that Vince Clarke's first big musical love was a duo – though his admiration of Simon & Garfunkel is less expected for someone so closely associated with synth-pop.

Speaking via Skype from his home in Michigan, Vince is quick to caution against reading too much into his appreciation of *The Sound Of Silence* spawning his fascination for musical couples. "It wasn't the idea of the partnership that hooked me with Simon & Garfunkel," Vince explains. "With them, it really was just the songwriting. Their songs were – or at least seemed – simple enough that I thought 'Maybe I could do that.' They inspired me to get into songwriting, but the fact they're a duo is a coincidence. Or I think it is!"

Instead, like so many 80s pairings, it was Sparks who, well, sparked Vince's interest in the synth duo format. "*This Town Ain't Big Enough For The Both Of Us* was the first single I ever bought," Vince reveals. Well, what else would you expect? "That image of the colourful singer and the miserable bloke behind that every synth duo has... I blame it all on Sparks. I met Russell and Ron when I remixed *When Do I Get To Sing My Way* for them many years ago [1994 to be exact – Ed] and they were exactly as they seemed on TV. That really pleased me."

Another key moment for Vince in realising the power of duos was discovering OMD. "Their first single *Electricity* was a huge influence one me," he enthuses. "*Electricity* was when I really got turned onto electronic music, because it made me see it could be emotional as well as futuristic.

"Funnily enough, I've just remixed *Almost* – the B-side of *Electricity* – and that was a real fanboy moment, as it's such an iconic track for me. I was so determined not to change it too much and to keep the emotion of the original."

NEED OR NECESSITY

Of course, before forming his first key synth duo with Yazoo, Vince got sidetracked by his new life with Depeche Mode. He began to see his musical future mapped out straight away.

"I'm a very practical person," emphasises Vince. "A lot of my career has been about trying to be practical with what I've got, and that goes back to Depeche. The fact Depeche didn't have a drummer wasn't because we had anything against drummers, we just didn't know any! We only knew one drummer in Basildon, and he was in every other local band

HEART OF GLASS

AS THE KING OF SYNTH DUOS, VINCE CLARKE HAS ONE MORE COLLABORATION HE'D STILL LOVE TO ACHIEVE – WITH RENOWNED COMPOSER PHILIP GLASS...

Clarke became a fan of the modern classical great around the time Erasure began to succeed, with Glass' 1982 chamber music collection *Glassworks* his initial entry point. "*Glassworks* is accessible, and it was a good way to start getting into Philip's music," explains Vince. "I used to fall asleep by leaving it playing on repeat late at night on my CD player. A lot of Philip's music is really relaxing, the type of thing I tried to do with Martyn Ware in The Clarke And Ware Project."

In the pop realm, Glass has worked with David Byrne and Leonard Cohen, as well as remixing for S'Express and Aphex Twin. "Obviously, Philip uses real instruments more than I'm known for. A lot of Erasure demos, especially in our early days, start out on piano and guitar. I'm interested in all areas of music, not just electronic music – so long as I don't have to have anything to do with vocals, I'm happy! But I think if I ever did work with Philip, it'd be fascinating to try to achieve his contemplative, hypnotic style of music with electronics."

Has Vince ever reached out to Philip to see if he'd be interested in working together? "Oh no," says a faintly horrified Vince. "I get nervous about meeting most people. I don't think I would be with Philip, I think I'd be alright trying to work with him. If it happened, it'd be amazing for me – I don't know if it'd be so amazing for him! I'd be too shy to try to reach out to him, but you never know, maybe one day I'll get that dream email. Philip – if you're reading this, give me a call."

already. He was also the only musician we knew with a van. But then drum machines came along, and we thought 'OK, hang on, we don't need a drummer anymore. And actually, we don't need a van either, because we can put our synths in cases and carry them ourselves.' Everything about who Depeche were already suddenly became much more practicable."

It was that practicality which led Vince to respond to fellow Basildon musician Alison Moyet's advert in *Melody Maker* seeking people to form a blues band with after Alison's punks The Screamin' Ab Dabs had split. The result was Yazoo who, while not exactly as "rootsy" as Alison's advert suggested, had a new form of blues in their two albums' emotional heft. "After Depeche, I thought 'OK, I can do the music myself'," Vince explains. "Thanks to groups like OMD and Soft Cell, it was obvious that being a duo could work. It's easier to collaborate with one person than it is with three people in a traditional guitar/bass/drums line-up. You only have to persuade one other person of your genius idea! The advances in technology made duos so much easier. I could just programme a computer and a drum machine and handle all the music myself. That gave me a sense of independence."

Ultimately, Yazoo proved to be a case of right band, wrong time, as Vince admits he was still too bruised by life in Depeche to be as supportive as he could have been with Alison. "I was young and headstrong," he says. "I didn't really know how to collaborate with another musician at that time – it's something I've had to learn over the years, and Yazoo bore the brunt of that."

EXPERIMENTAL COLLECTIVES

After two hectic years, it was time for another move, in The Assembly with fellow producer Eric Radcliffe. The Assembly's only single *Never Never* in 1983 made them one of the all-time great one-hit wonders, but that wasn't their intention. *Never Never* featured Feargal Sharkey, himself freshly band-free after leaving The Undertones. "I'm not sure if The Assembly qualifies as a duo," considers Vince. "I saw us as... a project, I guess. It's most accurate to say we intended The

"I WAS YOUNG AND HEADSTRONG. I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW HOW TO COLLABORATE WITH ANOTHER MUSICIAN AT THAT TIME – IT'S SOMETHING I'VE HAD TO LEARN OVER THE YEARS, AND YAZOO BORE THE BRUNT OF THAT"

Assembly to be a revolving trio, with a new singer for each single."

However, while Feargal wasn't a songwriter and thus open to Vince and Eric's songs, The Assembly's other putative singers – including Blancmange's Neil Arthur and Matt Johnson of The The – were writers, and naturally wanted input into the music too. "Having a different co-writer for each song would have made it hard developing our own sound," reasons Vince. "It just didn't pan out with the guys we tried, and it became clear The Assembly wasn't going to work."

There were no hard feelings, with Eric going on to become a regular remixer for Erasure. Before that, however, came another learning curve on Vince's third duo, the functionally-named Vince Clarke With Paul Quinn, featuring the former singer of cult popsters Bourgie Bourgie. "Paul was a sweet guy," recalls Vince. "But he was really shy, and I don't think Paul saw himself as being a frontman. He was so shy that I never really got to know him, and neither of us saw it being able to work longterm." After one under-valued single with Paul, 1985's *One Day*, Vince finally struck paydirt with his next ally – former meat factory worker Andy Bell.

ERASURE HEADS

Yazoo rarely played live, and Vince's subsequent two projects didn't last long enough to tour. It was with Andy in Erasure that Vince joined Dave Ball,

***One Day* by Vince Clarke and Paul Quinn was released just as Erasure was forming. Reviewed as "powerful" and "romantic and flowing", it grazed the Top 100 – just**

The unlikely couple: Alison Moyet and Vince Clarke may never have gone to the pub together and split up after less than two years, but the musical chemistry was undeniable

NEW WORLDS BEYOND

WHERE NEXT FOR ERASURE? REVELLING AS EVER IN THE THRILL OF THE TOTALLY BLANK SLATE, VINCE AND ANDY HAVE NO IDEA – AND THEY LIKE IT THAT WAY...

Erasure have been on a creative role this decade. As well as releasing studio albums *Tomorrow's World*, *The Violet Flame* and *World Be Gone*, there have been two live albums and *World Beyond*, a collaboration with Belgian classical outfit Echo Collective.

"I don't know why we've been so prolific recently," Vince muses. "The way Andy and I create new music hasn't changed... I honestly think we've just been lucky recently. When the two of us sit down to write, it still amazes me that we can do it. You never believe you're going to come out with anything. You go in with nothing, work together for a couple of hours, and two hours later you've got a song. It's a mystery to me how that happens. I've no idea how other groups work – I've asked them, but they never know either."

It's that sense of mystique that fuels Vince after nearly 40 years in music. "Even though I'm really, really old, the mystery and the magic of how songs are made is what keeps me going," he enthuses. "I imagine songwriting must be a mystery to everyone. I can't imagine how anyone could write to a formula, no matter how much people talk about algorithms for success on streaming services. When Andy and I get together, we have no preconceived ideas of how a song should sound or what it should be about. We just go for it, and something miraculously comes out at the end."

The pair have spoken about making their next album "Hi-NRG and disco", but Vince laughs: "The one thing I've learned is that what we plan will have nothing to do with how an album ends up sounding. Maybe the next record will have elements of Hi-NRG and disco, but it could just as easily end up an album full of ballads."

Chris Lowe and Ron Mael in gaining a lasting public persona as someone who, essentially, glowered behind their singer. "I've never played up to the 'moody synth guy' image on stage, I promise you," protests a laughing Vince. "I've never needed to, because I'm naturally miserable!"

He does accept that he's a natural fit in terms of providing a contrast to Andy's theatrics on stage. "I think the keyboard players in a lot of synth duos do share personality traits," he reasons. "I was the kid at school at the back of the class, picking my nose and keeping my head down. I've not changed much! But you want that contrast in a duo, I think, because when you've got someone who's such a brilliant natural performer as Andy, it'd distract from what he was doing if I was trying to get the crowd's attention too."

Most likely, anyone trying to see what Vince Clarke is up to on stage at an Erasure show will be witnessing him in a state of anxiety. "I have a lot of stuff to think about when we perform live," he says.

Martin Gore and Vince Clarke joined forces as VCMG in 2012 and released the album *Ssss* and three subsequent EPs

© Travis Shinn

"I GET DISTRACTED BY JUST HOW GOOD ANDY IS. I LIKE BEING AT THE BACK OF THE STAGE WATCHING WHATEVER IT IS THAT ANDY IS ABOUT TO DO NEXT. ANDY IS A NATURAL FRONTMAN"

© Naomi Dryden-Smith

Above: Andy Bell, who names his favourite Erasure albums as 1989's *Wild!*, 1991's *Chorus*, 1995's *Erasure* and *Night Bird* from 2005

"It's mostly really mundane things, like 'What if that bit of kit breaks down – how will we fix it?' It's happened many times. "What also happens is that I get distracted by just how good Andy is. I like being at the back of the stage watching whatever it is that Andy is about to do next. Andy is a natural frontman, and what he can achieve is amazing. I'd never be able to be as brash on stage, let alone try a dance routine. It's just not me, and I feel very fortunate that I'm in a band with someone who's a master at it."

It's easy to forget now, but Erasure's 1986 debut album *Wonderland* wasn't a big commercial success, with Andy and Vince touring it on the toilet circuit until follow-up *The Circus* made them huge. "I had no idea what Andy was like as a person when Erasure started out," Vince explains. "Touring the first album so extensively is when our relationship gelled, pulling together in the face of adversity because we played so many crappy little bars and clubs.

"I couldn't have known at first that Andy and I would go on to work together for so long so well. Even when Erasure began to succeed, I didn't realise Andy and I would be in it for the long haul. When it came, our success made us so busy that I didn't stop to think what it was about the two of us that gelled so well – we'd do an album, that would go great, and so then we'd do another album and that would do OK too!"

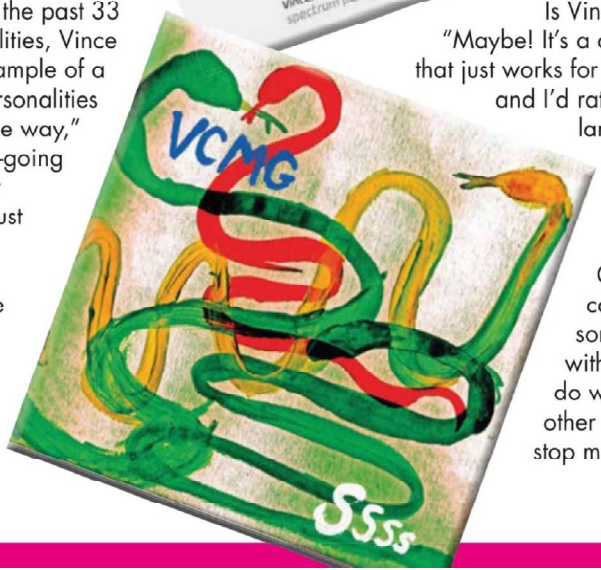
OPPOSITES ATTRACT

Now that he has had time over the past 33 years to appreciate Andy's qualities, Vince feels Erasure are a textbook example of a synth duo in harmony. "Our personalities have met in the middle along the way," he smiles. "Andy is a very easy-going guy off stage. I used to get very precious about life, and Andy just isn't precious. Some of his low-keyness has rubbed off on me, and I've made him slightly more determined. We don't have disputes, partly because Andy is so laidback. If I come up with a melody or a lyric which Andy doesn't like, we just drop it, and vice versa. Nobody fights their corner, so if an idea is going to become a song on our album it has to be one we're both really into."

Recent years have seen the rise of the solo artist, with Adele, Sam Smith, Ellie Goulding, Calvin Harris, Dua Lipa and plenty more thriving while the synth duo has slightly fallen out of favour. "Gary Numan was right all along," laughs Vince. "It's interesting how that's happened – I was talking to OMD about it recently. I think it's back to practicality... you don't need that other person doing all the music like me if you've got a series of producers doing it behind the scenes for a solo artist.

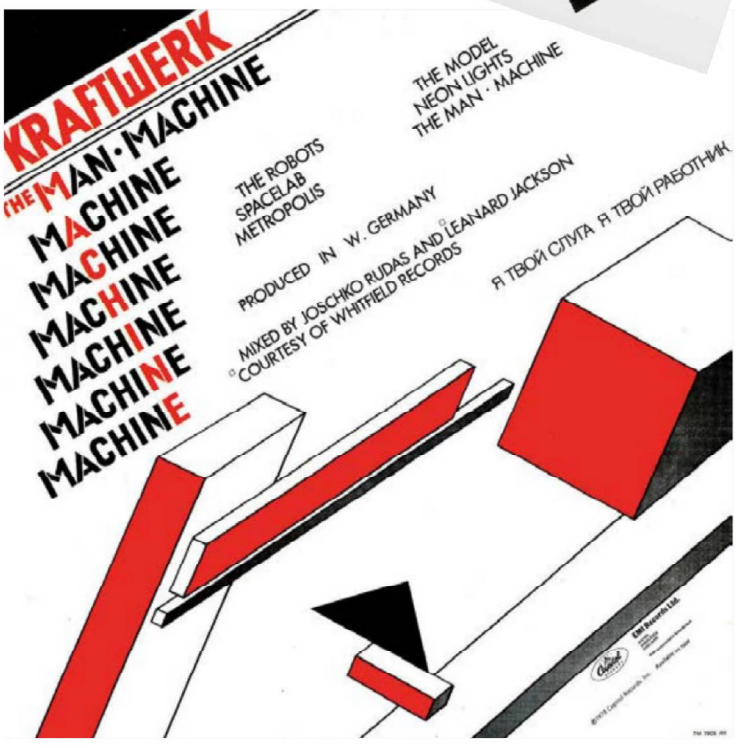
"But who do you bounce ideas off? I can only speak for myself, but I could never be a solo artist – I'd never get anything done. I need someone like Andy, who's great at telling me 'That's enough, that song works' or 'You need to do this to that song.'"

Since Erasure began, Vince has made other albums in occasional duos including The Clarke And Ware Project with Martyn Ware of Heaven 17 ("a hero of mine, so it was lovely with Martyn"), Clarke:Hartnoll with Orbital's Paul Hartnoll, and VCMG with his old Depeche Mode bandmate Martin Gore ("Weirdly low-pressure and natural," he summarises. "It happened just because Martin is even more into the type of music I found myself writing.")



Is Vince addicted to duos? "Maybe! It's a collaborative style that just works for me. I can't be solo, and I'd rather not be in a large group. I've got my own studio and I can swap ideas with someone remotely like I did in Clarke:Hartnoll, or I can meet up and talk to someone sat face-to-face with them like I usually do with Andy. Having one other collaborator seems to stop me going insane." ■

Brilliantly rhythmic and reduced to red, black and white, Karl Klefisch and Günther Fröhling's concept for Kraftwerk's 1978 LP *The Man Machine* currently resides in the Museum of Modern Art in New York



AUTOMATION, SPACE TRAVEL; *THE MAN MACHINE* LOOKED LIKE SOMETHING FROM THE FUTURE. ITS DESIGN CUES, HOWEVER, WERE STRAIGHT FROM THE BOOK OF RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM

SYNTH POP ART

THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF GREAT ELECTRONIC ALBUMS, AND NEARLY AS MANY ARTFUL SLEEVE DESIGNS. IN THIS POP ART FEATURE WE DIG DEEPER INTO THE STORIES BEHIND A FEW EXAMPLES OF THE BEST ALBUMS OF THE GENRE THAT LOOK AS STRIKING AS THEY SOUND…

ANDREW DINELEY

At the end of the 1970s, punk had reset the cultural clock and a new wave of sound and vision spawned the synth-pop genre. Established ways in which songs were written and recorded were cast aside as artists forged close working relationships with creatives to package up their sounds in ways that were as fresh and unique as synth-pop itself.

Kraftwerk are often cited as the godfathers of electronic music, so it's fitting that our first example should be from the Düsseldorf quartet. *The Man Machine*, Kraftwerk's seventh album, helped them achieve mainstream success and its bold graphic aesthetic can't have hindered. In 1978 the sleeve's postmodern styling was just as ahead of its time as its six tracks. With its futuristic themes of automation and space travel encapsulated beautifully in the album's imagery, *The Man Machine* looked like something from the future. Its design cues, however, were appropriated from 50 years prior by the sleeve's designer, Karl Klefisch: the graphics are straight from the book of Russian constructivism, with some elements being an homage to the work one of the movement's most prominent artists, El Lissitzky, whose piece *About 2* is clearly evident in the back cover design.

A couple of years later, John Foxx carried the torch for detached, robotic electronics and would also influence many, including Gary Numan. He'd already declared "I want to be a machine" as frontman for Ultravox, and his debut album with its sparse electronic sound and enigmatic imagery proved he was more than up to the challenge. *Metamatic*, Foxx's 1980 solo debut, was arguably the first electronic album of the decade and took its name from the Métamatic kinetic machine sculptures of avant-garde artist Jean Tinguely, thus plundering art of the past – as Kraftwerk had – to posture a style of the future. The album's austere sleeve with its image of the artist reaching into the light was shot in a Shoreditch basement decades before the area was reborn as a hipster haven, and its sci-fi otherworldliness remains perfect for the music it packaged. Chris Gabrin's photography was laid out by graphic designer Malcolm Garrett, who would go on to form Assorted Images – a creative studio that went on to design many of the decade's most iconic sleeves.

Daniel Miller originally founded Mute Records in 1978 to release his one-off single *Warm Leatherette/ T.V.O.D.* Under the moniker of The Normal, Miller tapped – like John Foxx – into the dystopian works of author JG Ballard, but his Silicon Teens project was something entirely different. Silicon Teens' only album *Music For Parties* was released in 1980 and contained mostly cover versions of rock and roll standards from the 1950s-60s. Miller sang deadpan vocals over his own synth-pop arrangements that would within months be echoed in the emergent sounds of Depeche Mode. For design, Miller drafted in his friend Simone Grant, whose hand-drawn cartoon characters graced the album's sleeve

The plastic-wrapped swan on the sleeve of *Speak & Spell* divides fans to this day – and the band. "The idea sounded really great," Dave Gahan told *Sounds* in 1982. "It was meant to be nice and romantic, but it turned out just comical"

LEST WE FORGET

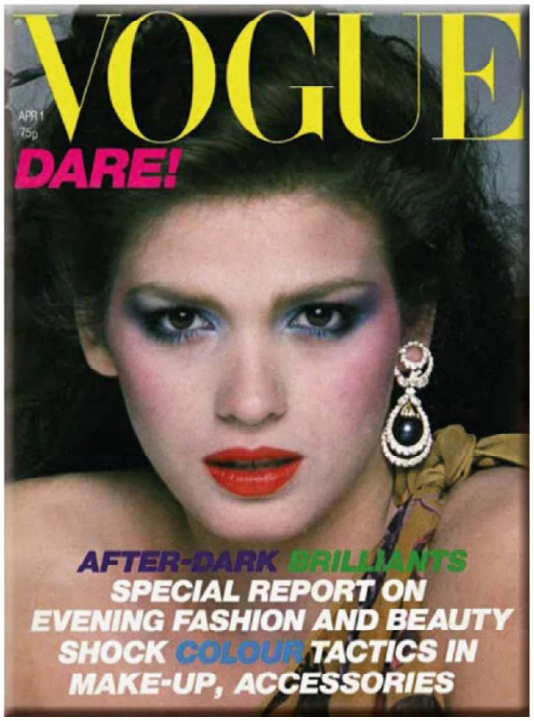
HONOURABLE MUST-MENTIONS FROM FOUR DECADES OF SYNTH-POP DESIGN...

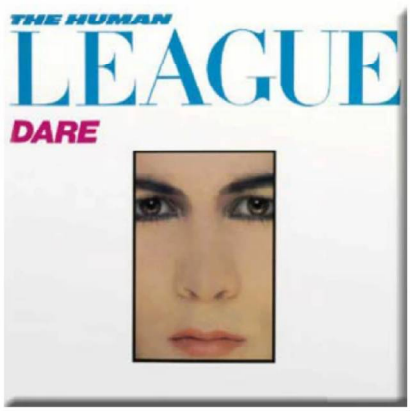
Classic Pop magazine's regular Pop Art feature digs deep into the stories behind record sleeve design – which, in an era of digital downloads, many of us still cherish as a forgotten art. It's a thankless task narrowing the list down, and with some of the artists mentioned in this feature, it was a challenge selecting just one sleeve from their oeuvre. These are just a few additional examples of electronic music's exemplary design by an array of artists that could not go unmentioned, though: *The Pleasure Principle* by Gary Numan, *The Party's Over* by Talk Talk, *Penthouse And Pavement* by Heaven 17, *Upstairs At Eric's* by Yazoo, *Happy Families* by Blancmange, *Who's Afraid Of...* by The Art of Noise, *Human's Lib* by Howard Jones, *Happiness* by The Beloved, *Original Soundtrack* by S'Express, *Technique* by New Order, *Electric Head* by The Grid, *Lost Horizons* by Lemon Jelly, *Disgraceful* by Dubstar, *The Everlasting Blink* by Bent, *Head First* by Goldfrapp, and *Stay Free* by The Sound of Arrows.

and its three singles. "The idea was that they were supposed to be a bunch of teenagers rather than me on my own in the studio," explained Miller. "We wanted it to look as if the sleeve had been put together in one of their bedrooms."

IMAGES OF MYSTERY

Whilst there may be some musical similarities between Silicon Teens and Depeche Mode's 1981 debut album *Speak & Spell*, the sleeve's designs are worlds apart. *Speak & Spell* is an album bursting with commercial pop abandon. If synth-pop was seen as po-faced and cold, this did everything it could to change those perceptions – yet the album's sleeve, with its nesting swan in a plastic bag, wickedly belied its contents. "Brian Griffin did the photography," confirmed Daniel Miller. "Before we met, I'd been a fan of his work with artists like Devo and Siouxsie. The photograph divided people – I've no idea what it means, and I'm not sure that Brian does either!" Brian Griffin went on to photograph





The Human League took inspiration straight from the covers of European *Vogue*, Soft Cell chose a more direct seedy-in-Soho approach (albeit ultimately with a less risque shot) and Thomas Dolby's debut LP harked back to sci-fi of the 50s

the next four album sleeves for the band, some of which proved to be their best to this day.

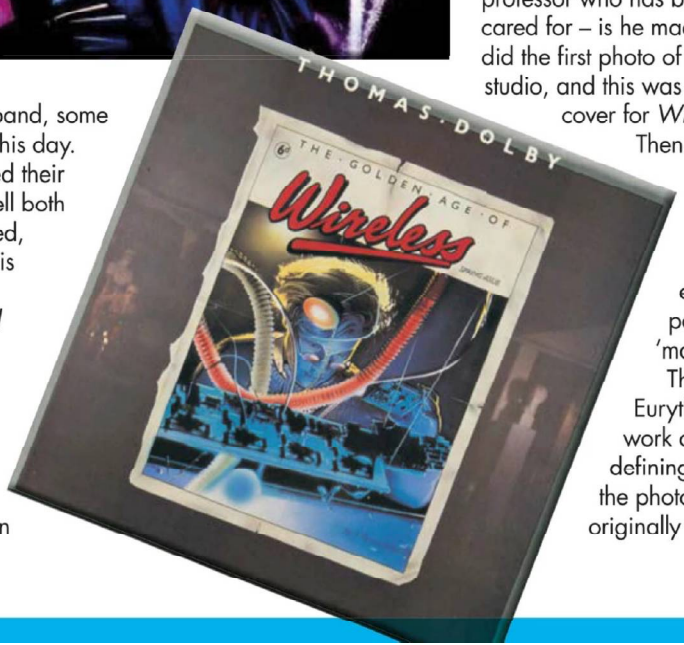
In the same year that they released their debuts, Depeche Mode and Soft Cell both contributed tracks to the suitably titled, if misspelt, *Some Bizzare* album. This compilation allowed each to raise their pop profiles, but it was *Tainted Love* that propelled Soft Cell into the mainstream and helped them achieve more than 200,000 advance orders alone for their *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* album in 1981. Fans expecting more synth-pop cover versions of Northern soul classics, however, experienced a rude awakening when they got to hear its songs of angst and sleaze with its perfectly apposite cover image. "The sleeve of the album – a photograph by Peter Ashworth – depicts a strange fluffy-haired couple, Dave looking handsome, while I hide tired eyes behind more cheap sunglasses," Marc Almond said. "At the last minute in the photo session I picked up a copy of *Vogue*, wrapped it in a brown-paper bag as if it were porn I was trying to conceal, and drew it surreptitiously from my jacket for a touch of sleaze. In fact both Dave and I preferred another photo, in which I am exposing my shoulder while a psychotic-looking Dave is about to plunge a switchblade into me. Needless to say the safe picture was chosen, complete with pink neon, looking cheap and cheesy – a perfect cover for the record, some would say."

We never learned which issue of *Vogue* Marc Almond had in his brown paper bag, but we do know that the magazine also inspired the creative direction of *Dare* for The Human League that same year. Virgin Records invested heavily in this breakthrough album, lavishing it with a glossy gatefold treatment. It was slick, stylish and ultra-glamorous, and its designer, Ken Ansell, worked closely with the League's remaining founders on the concept. "Phil Oakey and Adrian Wright came with the whole look, essentially a reworking of a European *Vogue* cover," Ansell details. "The close-up photos were already taken but they needed retouching to match the original magazine cover. There was virtually no time to put it together, but fortunately we all wanted a minimalistic typographical approach with plenty of space."

FUTURE PAST

If *Dare* was a pristine example of 80s pop gloss, then Thomas Dolby's 1982 debut album *The Golden Age Of Wireless* was a charming pastiche of bygone times – multi-layered and rendered to perfection under Bill Smith's creative direction, with the help of illustrator Mark Thomas and photographer Andrew Douglas.

"This was quite a complicated collaboration," says Smith. "The idea was Thomas as a mad professor who has been put in an institution to be cared for – is he mad, old or just worn out? Andrew did the first photo of Thomas tinkering in his lab/studio, and this was then turned into a magazine cover for *Wireless* magazine by Mark. Then the magazine was framed on the wall of the institution, with Thomas being wheeled around by a nurse reflected in the glass. So many layers… each with a different reference point perfectly reflecting Thomas' 'mad music professor' philosophy."



The sleeve of *Touch* by Eurythmics, again the photographic work of Peter Ashworth, was a defining pop image of 1983, although the photo of Annie Lennox wasn't originally shot for this purpose.

The beguiling and startling image of Annie Lennox in the sleeve design of *Touch* played with concepts of gender stereotypes, mixing its messages of dominance and submission

"THIS IS A VERY SIMPLE IMAGE OF CONTRADICTION – VULNERABILITY AND POWER. ANNIE'S USE OF COSTUME AND ATTITUDE HAS CREATED INTRIGUE AND MYSTERY THAT REMAINS TO THIS DAY"

"This is a very simple image of contradiction – vulnerability and power," explains Ashworth. "Annie's use of costume and attitude throughout her career in a search for the alternative persona has created intrigue and mystery around her that remains to this day. It was shot for the cover of the October 1983 issue of *The Face* magazine."

Designer Laurence Stevens added a deft graphic touch to the layout. "I used my mixed-up typeface treatment for all the titles for the cover, but this was a happy accident," Steven admits. "I'd run out of most of my Letraset, so I just created the titles for each of the tracks on the album using whatever I had, mixing upper and lower case with different fonts."

OMD always opted out of appearing on their album covers, which from their 1980 debut onward led to a series of ingenious designs, mostly under the creative direction of Peter Saville. By the time of *Dazzle Ships* in 1983 they had reached dizzying heights of design decadence, with five people involved in the development of the album's gatefold, die-cut extravaganza.

"The idea came from me seeing this Edward Wadsworth image in an art catalogue," says Saville. "He was inspired by seeing camouflaged battleships in the docks in Liverpool. It's such a great term… 'Wow, dazzle ship! What does it mean?' I had to know more. Andy [McCluskey] picked up on it and it became the theme. I found the cover very difficult. I'm not the best person for camouflage. I'm too reductive. I ended up giving it to Malcolm Garrett, saying 'could you do this again, because there's no camouflage left – I've taken it all away!"'

The sleeve of Bronski Beat's debut album *The Age Of Consent* could be seen as an example of formulaic 80s graphic design with its neon hues and angular shapes, but there's more behind it. The pink triangle central to the image was originally devised by the Nazis in World War II to identify homosexuals in concentration camps and was later adopted as a symbol of gay pride, years before the rainbow flag. It was a defiant and brave gesture at a difficult time in politics for the gay community

Above: the design for Bronski Beat's *The Age Of Consent* flirted with shapes and colours associated with Bauhaus and the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, but there was a deeper meaning: the yellow patch was a mark forced upon Jews since the 11th century. The Nazis adopted it, and also used the pink triangle to brand homosexuality

and a bold statement for Bronski Beat, who extended the idea inside the album with Bruce Gill at Green Ink design studio. "There were some issues with typesetting the inside sleeve of the album," says Bruce Gill. "As well as the lyrics, we also listed 'European laws regarding minimum age for lawful homosexual relationships between men' with a phone number for gay legal advice. One of the outside companies we commissioned for typesetting objected, and refused to do it!"

In 1985, ABC treated us with an extraordinary new image, sound and line-up. The sleeve of their groundbreaking album *How To Be A Zillionaire!* as arresting as the band's radical new sound. Pre-computer, it's impressive for Keith Breeden's elaborate graphic treatment. "I looked at Warner Bros' Looney Tunes for inspiration," he explains. "I was also playing arcade games so I guess the result was a morphing of the two styles. Creating the artwork was very laborious, but I felt that we were doing something new and exciting. I remember hearing the rough mixes for the album and thinking there was something special – a lot of energy and vision with all sorts of eclectic references and concerns, and I tried to reflect that in the graphics."

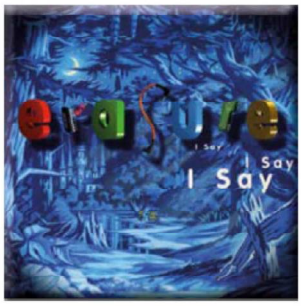
LOOK OF LOSS

THE DECLINE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE AND DESIGN IN A PRE-PACKAGED WORLD

The progress of technology and its influence on synth-pop was echoed in the way that sleeve designs were created. In the same way that early pioneers of the genre had used rudimentary technology to produce extraordinary sounds, imaginative sleeve designers of the era worked without computers to devise some of the innovative examples showcased in this feature. As we moved onward from the mid-1980s, synth-pop's sonic palette broadened as artists embraced computers, which impacted equally on the sleeve designs of the period. By 1985 designers and musicians could realise ideas with greater ease in ways that were previously unimaginable. Ironically, as time went on and everyone in their bedroom with a laptop became a potential pop star, it was this same technology that would end up homogenising much of the look and sound of synth-pop. The digital era also precipitated a decline in sleeve art for the whole music industry, and the digitisation of design that had originally aided the careers of many great record sleeve designers in some ways became their downfall as the sleeve's priority was diminished in favour of streaming and digital downloads.

MONOCHROME SETS

Also in 1985, A-ha released their debut album *Hunting High And Low*. The video for the album's first single *Take On Me* also subtly informed Jeri Heiden's sleeve design. "Warner Bros agreed that the band should be presented in an evocative way to avoid appearing too glossy or teen-pop, opting for a vintage black and white *Rumble Fish* vibe," says Heiden. "I was doing a full-sized mock-up of the cover, using tracing paper overlays, with handwritten and typewritten elements, photostats, drawings, type transfers, paint, ink… whatever was handy. When creative director Jeff Ayeroff saw it he said "That's it!" and we used it as the final shooting art for the cover. It gave a nod to the video, but stood on its own."



Pet Shop Boys' 1986 debut album *Please* featured a tiny lone photograph against a void of white. Designer Mark Farrow wanted a sleeve that didn't look like a record cover, and *Please* couldn't have been more different to its hyper-saturated chart competition. Neil Tennant: "We were creating images that were intentionally un-pop – some imagery around the first album was quite bleak. It's mostly black-and-white. We wanted, and still want, to look totally different to everyone else."

Manager Tom Watkins had more complex aspirations. "A big fold out lattice-work cover, opening out into a crucifix that contained all the mean and moody images they had created over the last couple of years," he said. "I excitedly folded the cardboard out in front of them, knowing they were going to love it. An awkward silence ensued. Neil and Chris mumbled a few words with

an overwhelming air of indifference." Interestingly, elements of this abandoned idea were partly implemented in the design of the rare fold-out promo version of the album.

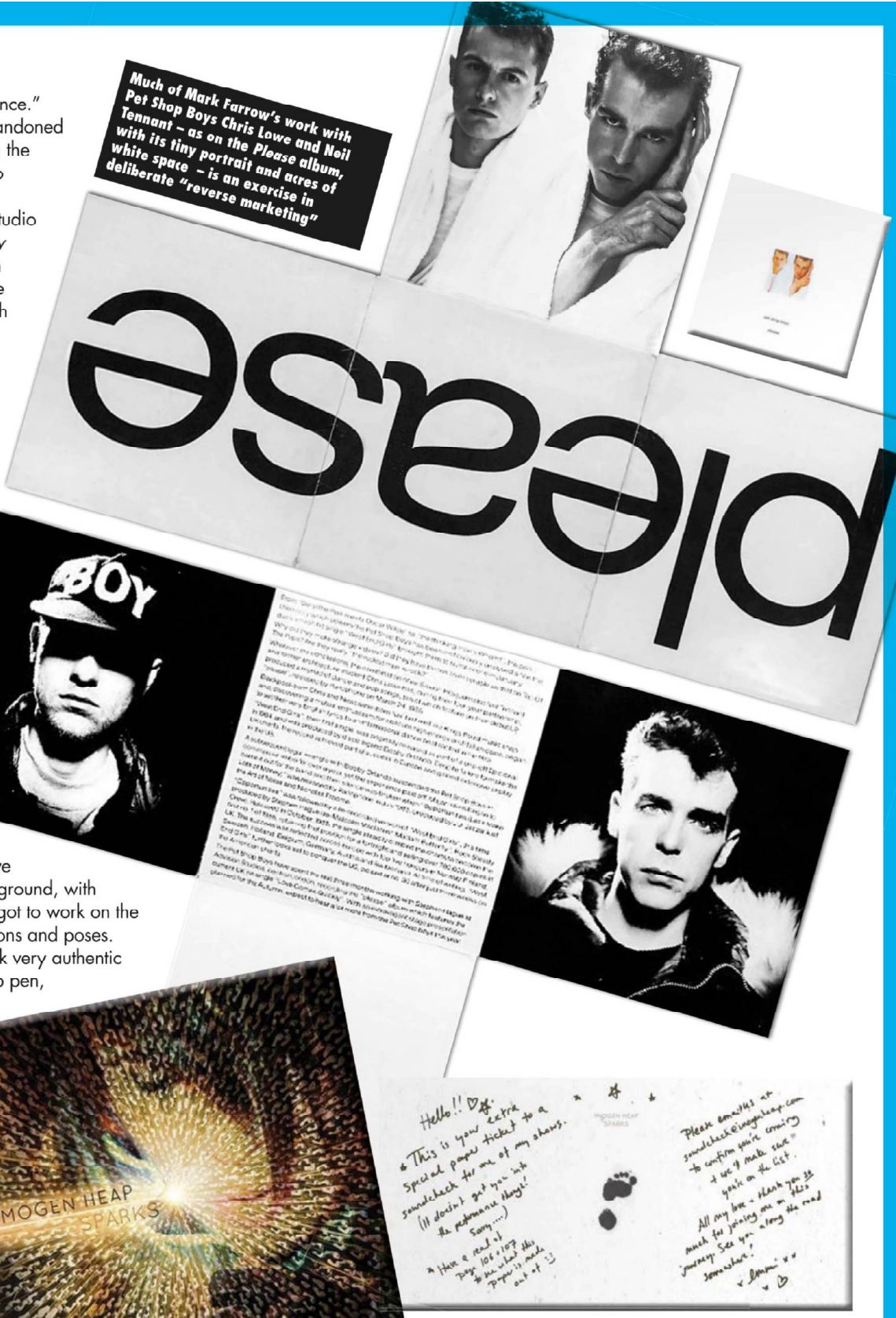
The design of Erasure's sixth studio album in 1994, *I Say I Say I Say* has some things in common with OMD's *Dazzle Ships*. Both came in complex gatefold formats, with Erasure even adding a pop-up element to their limited edition. Both had five people behind the design, and Erasure's sleeve was creatively directed by Malcolm Garrett's Assorted Images, with character design by Norman Hathaway. "Mute Records were emphatic that the sleeves should be contemporary and appeal to current design trends, with a techno/3D aesthetic," says Hathaway. "Andy Bell had a differing view – he wanted a Disneyesque illustration of a forest with he and Vince as cartoons and some sort of mystical event happening. The idea was to have an old-fashioned rendered background, with the cartoons in a flat 2D style. I got to work on the caricatures in a variety of situations and poses. I wanted the whole sleeve to look very authentic so inked the drawings with a dip pen, scanned them and filled in flat colour behind to simulate cel paint."

By 2013 synth-pop bands were thinner on the ground, but Chvrches flew the flag for the genre with a unique sound and some strident graphics. Their initial design aesthetic, seen on their debut album *The Bones Of What You Believe* and its singles, was the work of Amy Burrows.

"I was lucky enough to work with the band from the first logo design onwards to create a solid, consistent identity throughout all the releases," says Burrows. "The release schedule allowed the album layout to be planned with the singles, which meant we could work from the ground up to create a conceptual 'set'. The band were interested in focusing on graphics and I had pitched the use of a set of symbols. I think holding back on the band shots added to the mystery and momentum."

In 2014, Imogen Heap released her fourth album, *Sparks* – an album and design concept that was more than three years in the making. Its standard sleeve design was as detailed as each of its synthesised, multi-textured soundscapes. Heap invited fans to be part of the cover artwork by incorporating their footprints into an abstract portrait of the artist herself. The creativity behind every aspect of the album is amazing; the boxed limited edition version contained books, playing cards, multiple discs and a unique footprinted invitation. Creative director Andy Carne worked closely with Imogen Heap on the entire project, filtering the artist's blue sky imaginings into sleeve packaging that even in the rich world of synth-pop design remains a high point to this day.

Much of Mark Farrow's work with Pet Shop Boys Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant – as on the *Please* album, with its tiny portrait and acres of white space – is an exercise in deliberate "reverse marketing"


please
BOY
IMOGEN HEAP
SPARKS
Hello!!
This is your extra special paper ticket to a soundcheck for one of my shows.
Please email us at soundcheck@imogenheap.com to confirm you're coming + we'll make sure you're on the list.
All my love - thank you so much for joining me on this journey. See you along the road somewhere!

Above: a sample of Andy Carne's interactive complexities for Imogen Heap. Below: Amy Burrows' symbolic work for Scottish trio Chvrches

CLASSIC ALBUM

THE INNOCENTS

ERASURE

THEIR THIRD ALBUM PROPER, *THE INNOCENTS* WAS ERASURE'S FIRST NO.1 ALBUM, THE ONE THAT MARKED THEIR BREAKTHROUGH IN THE US. WITH FIVE MILLION SALES TO DATE, IT IS ONE OF THE ALBUMS THAT HELPED MAKE SYNTH-POP A GLOBAL FORCE...

PAUL LESTER

Erasure's 1986 debut album *Wonderland* had peaked at No.71 in the UK, which was disappointing, especially considering the success Vince Clarke had enjoyed with Depeche Mode and Yazoo. What's more, the singles of the period, *Who Needs Love Like That, Heavenly Action* and *Oh L'Amour*, all failed to come within spitting distance of the Top 40. Clarke and his partner Andy Bell finally did the business with their second album, *The Circus*, which reached No.6 in April 1987, while its attendant singles, including the No.2 smash *Sometimes*, confirmed Erasure's commercial potential. "Life got busier for sure after that," said Vince Clarke. Bell remembers making his first appearance with Erasure on *Top Of The Pops*, at which point Mute label boss Daniel Miller warned him that he would never be able to take public transport again, which actually turned out to be true – their recognisability increased severalfold by 1987.

The Innocents was the first Erasure album to be recorded on the back of substantial success. In the run-up, Bell recalls listening to classics from the disco, white soul and synth-pop realms: Eurythmics' 1983 album *Touch*, plus "lots of Sylvester and Jimmy Somerville and Helen Terry". Clarke doesn't remember anything particular on his playlist, considering it more important to keep away from other artists lest they overly influence his own work.

According to Bell, most of the material was written on guitar and piano at Clarke's house in Notting Hill, West London. "The songs were demoed on both guitar and piano, then recorded onto a micro-cassette recorder," Clarke told *Classic Pop*. "I think we wrote at both mine and Andy's homes."

With *Sometimes* and the other singles from *The Circus* doing so well, it might have been expected for the duo to feel the pressure to repeat their successes, but that wasn't the case. Bell says that they didn't consider it, insisting they were "just having a great time". Clarke remembers writing *A Little Respect* and *Ship Of Fools* at his home, and that the chords for the latter ("Ooh! They're nice. Oooooh!" was Bell's ecstatic response) took about a quarter of an hour to get right. Clarke's memory is of "a heated debate" about the use of the word "respect", because he believed it had been overused, and he was probably right – yet Erasure's managed to invest the well-worn term with fresh lustre.

Parts of *The Innocents* were recorded at Blackwing Studios in southeast London, and others at the rather more "posh" (Clarke's word) Swanyard Studios in Islington, North London, with producer Stephen Hague at the helm in place of the previous album's Mark Ellis (aka Flood). Bell remembers the pre-programming and the dramas in the studio, the editing and the strange disappearance of Hague's girlfriend behind the studio console, so that she could hear him sing. Apparently, says Bell, "She thought I was an alien".

Pushed to describe the atmosphere in the studio, Clarke simply says "I found it very stressful." He does confirm that the difference between *The Innocents* and its two predecessors lay in the greater involvement of Bell: "We were real partners in the making of the record." In terms of synths and gadgets used on the album there were, among others, a Roland D-50, a Pro 1, an EMU drum machine and a Roland Juno 60. Hague, too, was key. Clarke found him "meticulous"; to Bell he was "great – a bit of an old hippy, really."

Were they drawn to Hague because of his work with New Order and Pet Shop Boys? "No," says Clarke. "I think Daniel came up with the idea." To what extent did Hague shape the sound and music on *The Innocents*? "Stephen was very meticulous with the vocals, the editing, the comping, tuning, and so on. He was also very fond of 'block chords'."

"The songs were demoed on both guitar and piano, then recorded into a micro-cassette recorder. I think we wrote at both mine and Andy's homes" **VINCE CLARKE**

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED
18 April 1988 (US May 24)

LABEL
Mute (UK) and Sire/Reprise (US)

PRODUCED BY
Stephen Hague, David Jacob and Erasure

ENGINEERS
Bob Kraushaar and David Jacob

RECORDED AT
Blackwing and Swanyard Studios

PERSONNEL
Andy Bell – lead vocals; Vince Clarke – vocals, synthesiser, keyboards, keytar, guitar, violin, piano, melodica; Kick Horns – brass; Caron Wheeler, Naomi Osborne, Jane Ayer – backing vocals

TRACK BY TRACK

1 A LITTLE RESPECT
The album opener – their 10th single, reaching No.4 in 1988 – alluded to Otis Redding's classic, but here it became a demand for respect from a man to his male lover. "Vince said we couldn't call it *A Little Respect* because the Aretha version was so well-known, but I said, 'Don't worry. I love it when things intertwine,'" said Bell later.

2 SHIP OF FOOLS
This poignant ballad showed that Erasure could offer more than just bouncy dance-pop. Co-produced by Dave Jacob, it peaked at No.6 in March 1988. The song was written on acoustic guitar in Clarke's dining room. "I don't think we'd had a ballad before, apart from the mid-tempo *The Circus*," Bell said. "I still love it. It felt like quite a departure."

3 PHANTOM BRIDE
Released in 2009 as part of a UK-only companion EP to the 21st anniversary edition of *The Innocents*. The song's ebullience contrasted sharply with the tale of "a shy girl from a lonely street", with no resolution to her misery even as the chorus achieves hi-NRG-ish levels of delirium.

4 CHAINS OF LOVE
Erasure's US breakthrough, climbing to No.12 on the Billboard Hot 100, with soulful backing vox and a effervescent arrangement. The drum sound came from a tiny Casio keyboard, making it their "first lo-fi loop". Bell calls it "a happy-go-lucky dance song" and was stunned to learn that it was a gay anthem on early US Pride marches.

5 HALLOWED GROUND
A sudden, stark contrast – a dolorous affair that reflects on society's ills ("Everybody's intent on killing someone" – someone had obviously been to Basildon). Bell explained that the lyrics, and the music, were inspired by Elvis Presley's *In The Ghetto*.

6 SIXTY-FIVE THOUSAND
This instrumental had an equally unusual inspiration: it was influenced by a 1940 swing standard called *Pennsylvania 6-5000* by jazz/big band legend Glenn Miller and his Orchestra. Many fans of the album find this the weak link in the chain, deeming it worthy, at best, of inclusion as a single B-side, but in hindsight it has a certain fizzy charm and idiosyncratic appeal.

7 HEART OF STONE
With appropriate brass supplied by up-and-coming London session favourites Kick Horns, this track was apparently born out of Bell and Clarke's deep love of Sixties Motown acts such as The Four Tops.

8 YAHOO!
More horns/backing vocals on "our big gospel tune". The message about the dangers of the Devil and the glory of God is hard to resist.

9 IMAGINATION
Inadvertently opening with the same piano chord as Supertramp's *The Logical Song* and with its allusion to another Motown classic, *Imagination* is an unignorable toe-tapper about, said Bell, the mind and the "tricks it can play on you."

10 WITCH IN THE DITCH
The unusual waltz-time *Witch In The Ditch* was not influenced by Kate Bush but, Bell has said, *The Wizard Of Oz*, though Clarke explains it was based on a folk waltz or a "Bavarian drinking song". Ever eclectic!

11 WEIGHT OF THE WORLD
Vince Clarke considers this one to be one of Erasure's best songs and finest lyrics. There are more soul references, plus a sense of spiritual uplift through hard times – an Erasure leitmotif.

12 WHEN I NEEDED YOU
This was, Clarke said, "an extra from the sessions and available to be used as a B-side". Popular among fans, it is almost a tale of two songs, with a slow verse and a midtempo, rhythmic chorus.

13 RIVER DEEP, MOUNTAIN HIGH
A radical electronic revamp of the 1966 Ike & Tina Turner classic. The Spector-produced tune was "a tune that we both loved," Bell admitted. "I was an absolute Phil Spector fanatic."

14 DON'T SUPPOSE
This extra track on the 21st anniversary edition of *The Innocents* was, according to Clarke, "our attempt at Nashville-style country… we recorded it in a tiny studio whilst on tour in the UK with a local banjo player [Lenny Westleigh]."

15 THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY
Another extra track from the 2009 iteration, this was a synthed-up rendition of the theme of the 1966 Sergio Leone western complete with its haunting Ennio Morricone refrain.

16 LIKE ZSA ZSA GABOR

17 LOVE IS COLDER THAN DEATH
The final two additions on the second CD of the 2009 reissue, these were written "completely off the cuff in the studio", Bell adding that he loves the humour in the former and that the latter "was an ode to a German film producer."

© Richard Haughton

© Getty Images

Also crucial was the engineer, Bob Kraushaar, a veteran of sessions by ZTT artists Propaganda and Art Of Noise and, later, Paul McCartney, The Human League and Pet Shop Boys. Additional flavour was provided by the backing singers – Caron Wheeler, Naomi Osborne and Jane Ayre – and the Kick Horns brass section (take a bow, Roddy Lorimer, Simon Clark, Steve Sidwell and Tim Sanders).

Hague gave *The Innocents* a slick, commercial sheen, but nothing too glossy or intrusive. He didn't impose his own sound – as, say, a Trevor Horn might have done – allowing Erasure themselves to dictate the end results. Bell considers it "quite live- and acoustic-sounding" and has deemed it their "most guitar-inspired album" this side of *Loveboat* [2000] and *Union Street* [2006]. Was there a deliberate decision to combine acoustic and electronic sounds on *A Little Respect*, the song which reached No.14 in the States? Clarke: "I've always loved the sound of acoustic guitar and I think it gave the track an extra bit of energy."

Decisions concerning the track order were mainly the province of Bell. As for the LP title, it was meant to have a quasi-religious quality: Bell explained that "the innocents" was an allusion to the biblical meek due to inherit the earth. Asked who he thought 'the innocents' were, Clarke replied, simply, "Not us, surely."

The artwork was designed by Paul Khera and Slim Smith and featured a stained-glass window of St. James and Charlemagne in Chartres Cathedral in France. "There's always a nod to the martyrs in our work," Bell said, cryptically.

The Innocents went to No.1 on its release in April 1988 (and again in January 1989) and soon went double-platinum, with sales over 600,000. Was Clarke surprised by the its success? "Amazed, more like," is his reply. The album has since gone on to sell five million copies worldwide. Clarke, renowned for his lugubriousness, doesn't exactly recall dancing in the streets on hearing that it had reached pole position in the charts, but he does admit to feeling "delighted". As for Bell, he said later: "I think you just feel really proud and have to enjoy it while it lasts, because you can't be No.1 forever."

The Innocents tour began at the smaller NEC in Birmingham in April 1988 and wound up at the NEC Arena that December. It was Erasure's longest ever tour, with the biggest venues they had ever played in, including amphitheatres in the UK and US. It was, in Bell's estimation, "quite mind-blowing. We had a huge crew by the time the tour ended. It really was like a big family."

Particularly memorable, concert-wise, though possibly for the wrong reasons, was Erasure's first big show in Orange County, California, during which Clarke ate something dodgy and as a consequence had to spend the entire gig "with a tightly-clenched bottom".

Possibly just as nerve-wracking was the moment they were given an award for Best British Group by Boy George in February 1989 at the legendarily embarrassing Brit Awards that were hosted by the unfortunate Sam Fox and Mick Fleetwood.

Oddly, only three singles were lifted from *The Innocents*, despite boasting several other chart contenders including *Phantom Bride* and *Heart Of Stone*; even an extra track such as *When I Needed You* could have easily been upgraded to single status. Perhaps the duo were anxious to release their seasonal *Crackers International* EP and its lead track *Stop!*, which hit the stores only a month after *A Little Respect* was released. Nevertheless, the feeling in some quarters is that *The Innocents* had more 'legs', singles-wise, than it was allowed to show. Still, that's nit-picking, when really there is so much to celebrate about *The Innocents*, conceivably Erasure's finest hour and without doubt one of the greatest electronic pop albums of the Eighties. ■

***Above;* Andy Bell and Vince Clarke at the Alstordorfer Sporthalle in Hamburg**

***Top;* Erasure credit the success of *The Innocents* to their concentrated promotional efforts and "the huge tour, which really helped"**

THE BIG PICTURE

THE VIDEOS

SHIP OF FOOLS

This was issued by Mute as the lead single from *The Innocents*. The video opens with Andy Bell lying on his back on a beach of stones and shells, all painted pastel blues, purples and pinks, amid the wreckage of a sailing dinghy. Vince Clarke joins him, and is shown strumming – or rather, picking out the intricate melodic figure on – a suitably blue acoustic guitar. Both are filmed against an aquatic scene, gazing wistfully into the middle distance, looking all sensitive yet serene.

youtu.be/ekc_aR5LyAk

CHAINS OF LOVE

The video to one of Erasure's most popular songs features Messrs Clarke and Bell performing the song while being hoisted through the air alongside mysterious hooded white-clad figures apparently suspended by thick metal chains. Clarke looks rather unimpressed to be flying around while attempting to grapple with a dangerously-suspended white grand piano. In fact, not one to express emotion, even he admitted later on that "it was very, very uncomfortable."

youtu.be/6J2OllpQgF8

A LITTLE RESPECT

A literalist's wet dream. As Bell sings, "A little something to make me sweeter," a hand pours sugar into a cup; on "Oh baby, refrain from breaking my heart" Clarke uses a hammer to shatter a giant heart; the word "soul" is accompanied by an Olympic banner that reads 'Seoul 1988'. Clarke: "We wanted a visual representation of every word. It was a fun day." Wheatus' 2009 cover had a promo starring Shawn Hatosy and the late Brittany Murphy. **youtu.be/x34icYC8zA0**

PHANTOM BRIDE

Broadcast live on the BBC on 1 September 1990 both on TV and Radio 1, this was the grand finale of Erasure's Wild! world tour, performed to 60,000 at Milton Keynes Bowl. The duo – and dancers – slip on stage cloaked in a curtain of dry ice and flavescent lighting before Wagner's wedding march gives way to the synth hook of *Phantom Bride*. *Chains Of Love*, *Heart Of Stone* and *A Little Respect* all feature in a spellbinding send-off. **youtu.be/FKDVMO6utJM**

GODFATHERS of POP

ANDY BELL

As one half of Erasure, Andy Bell is part of synth-pop's great pantheon. Here he talks to *Classic Pop* about all things synthesiser, his earliest memories of the genre, working as part of Erasure and the making of their classic album *Wild!*, due for a very welcome 30th anniversary re-release in 2019 in a specially expanded and re-tweaked form…

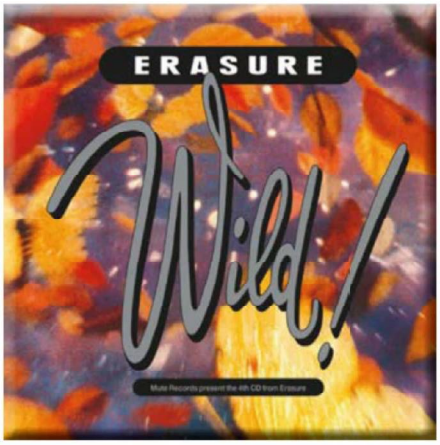
Do you remember when you first heard a synth-pop record?
I was always more of a soft punk, I wasn't into all the pogo-ing and spitting. I tended to go for the female vocalists, Siouxsie, Poly Styrene and those kind of people… avant-garde, Lene Lovich.

I suppose I got into synth music because it was really popular. I got into Japan, and my favourite tracks – I didn't realise until afterwards – were all the ones produced by Giorgio Moroder, you know, less guitar songs and more synth-pop. I suppose it wasn't really seen as synth-pop until maybe The Human League came out with *Dare*.

Was *Dare* a pivotal album for you?
Yes. For me, that was it… I mean, I hadn't heard of their previous stuff until I had heard that album, then once that album broke, I couldn't get enough of it, really, including Soft Cell and the Eurythmics. I remember leaving home, so that must have been a bit later on, like 1983 or 1984. When I first joined a group, in Ealing in London, our main influences were Soft Cell and the Eurythmics, and we used to copy them [laughs]. I was a huge Yazoo fan as well; I learned the whole of *Upstairs At Eric's* by heart.

What did you like so much about *Yazoo's Upstairs At Eric's*?
Although it's very sparse in places, it doesn't feel thin at all; really atmospheric. There are dance tracks, perhaps not intended as such. Then you've got blues on there, too. You know, you are in your late teens, studying to be a singer, and you listen to those records; you learn those songs, and when you can sing them back to front, it's a real sense of achievement.

I think it just seeped into my blood; I think I found guitars were too violent. Growing up in Peterborough, I wouldn't say it was particularly violent, but those young men, boozy, testosterone-filled nights… there is not much to do there, like any other small town in the UK. I think I found solace in the synths.



What do you think is the difference between a synth-pop set-up and a regular band?
Well, I was never really part of a band, so it's difficult to know. Vince didn't really want to be a part of a band, and I can understand where he's coming from. You need to be able to work within the confines of a band, and Vince wanted to be in control. We feel pretty much like outsiders, you know? I think using a synth is more like an artistic endeavour.

There is a defiance to it, isn't there?
I know from music biz insiders that we got criticised a lot; people thought that because Vince wasn't playing, I wasn't singing; we got really angry about it. But this showbiz thing is all an illusion really, isn't it?

What is it about synth-pop you love so much?
I just love synth sounds. I love arpeggios, because to me they are the electronic version of the harp, fluttering up and down. I remember when we were working on *Wonderland*, Vince would ask to come up with reams of random numbers to program and it would take hours to get five seconds of a song.

But Erasure actually write songs on acoustic guitars and piano as opposed to synths, don't you?
Yes, Vince was insistent we work like that, to ensure we had a fundamental song. But then Vince is also this sound creator, starting from scratch, rather than using pre-sets. Sometimes, in the studio, I would go out of my mind listening a drum beat for eight hours while he was working on it.

***Wild!* is celebrating its 30th anniversary with a deluxe edition. What do you remember about the recording of it?**
It was such a joyous time. We were at The Church, Dave Stewart's studio; we had a ball. Gareth Jones would use all his different types of microphone. We would go into different parts of the church and try recording there, it was a free-for-all.

What are your plans right now?
I'm taking a bit of time off, enjoying seeing friends and family. After that we'll start writing the next Erasure album, but it's good to recharge the batteries.

Matthew Lindsay

● ***Wild!* celebrates its 30th anniversary with a deluxe edition adding a whole slew of rarities and remixes to the original remastered album. It's released in March on Mute/BMG**

Erasure's Andy Bell: "We feel pretty much like outsiders. I think using a synth is more like an artistic endeavour"

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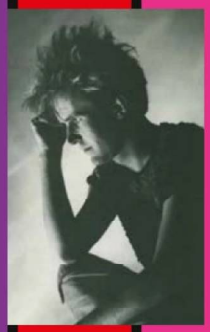
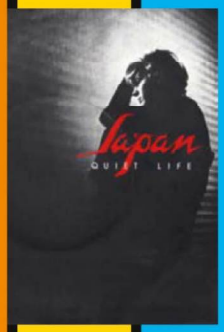
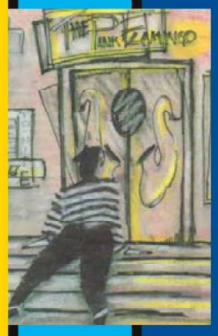


TOP 40 SYNTH-POP SINGLES

FROM JAPANESE ROBOTS TO BELGIAN EUROVISION PRANKSTERS, FROM COCKTAIL WAITRESSES TO SERIOUS-MINDED GERMANS, FROM SUBURBAN DREAMERS TO SOHO CLUB-CRAWLERS, FROM SHY EXPERIMENTERS TO EXTROVERT DIVAS, ALL LIFE IS SURELY HERE – AND IT'S ALL SYNTH-POP, AND GATHERED WITHIN OUR SELECTION OF THE FINEST OF THE GENRE'S SINGLES FROM THE LAST 40 YEARS…





The plan? To decide upon the greatest synth-pop singles of all time. The reality? Endless hours spent hunched over the record deck in headphones, revelling in the realisation that there are hundreds and hundreds of records that more than make the grade – and then a few more on top of that. Never ones to procrastinate in the face of seemingly insurmountable goals, we pushed onwards in the certainty that whatever we decided, someone, somewhere would disagree…

Naturally, so as not to be held entirely accountable, we enlisted help. And lots of it. For this mightiest of undertakings, we polled the *Classic Pop* team (some of whom offer their personal top 10 tracks here), every single DJ and musician we know, late-night forum chatrooms – and absolutely everything and everyone in between – in order to formulate a list to be really proud of. The only rules: no more than three tracks per artist… and sorry, but no cover versions (although there are some exceptional ones: Soft Cell, *Tainted Love;* Silicon Teens, *Memphis Tennessee;* Pet Shop Boys, *Always on My Mind;* The Communards, *Don't Leave Me This Way* – we're looking at you).

There are, of course, far too many 'honourable mentions' to list here, all of whom may well have made the grade on a different day, prime examples being A Flock Of Seagulls, Robert Görl, The Buggles, Thomas Leer, DAF, Thompson Twins, Jean-Michel Jarre, Kavinsky, Pete Shelley, Phil Lynott, Fad Gadget, Freez, M, Alphaville, Berlin Blondes, The Units, Ladytron, Hot Chip, Goldfrapp, Chairlift and M83 to name but a few… hell, even our unhealthy addiction to Q Lazzarus' *Goodbye Horses* was left unattended to.

With all the votes cast, we finally chalked up a shortlist that lined up mainstream pop classics alongside timeless old school creations, as well as some pioneering underground favourites that could not be overlooked. We chose to wilfully ignore the nagging impulse to neglect selections of an 'obvious' nature and replace them with hipper alternatives. Instead, for the most part at least, we chose to tell it how it is – this is *Classic Pop,* after all. When whittled down to just 40 prime cuts, it makes for a truly classic synth-pop playlist, and one that is sure to spark both joy and outrage in equal measure. We'd encourage you to get in touch and let us know the tracks that made your own Top 40s.

40

YELLOW MAGIC ORCHESTRA

BEHIND THE MASK

Established in Tokyo by a trio of Japanese music obsessives, YMO would go on to quietly influence the early waves of synth Britannia right through to the futurist disco climes of Daft Punk. With the sounds of Kraftwerk, Giorgio Moroder, video games and Japan's musical mores as a compass, they navigated the limits of an exotic palette of synths, samplers, sequencers and electric drum kits, and did away with convention entirely. A one-off LP had soon erupted into a 'techno-pop' revolution.

39

THE FALLOUT CLUB

DREAM SOLDIERS

A triad of inspired singles endowed The Fallout Club with deserved cult status, but they're primarily known for spawning a future pop spark in Thomas Dolby. Eerie futurist synthesisers preface Trevor Herion's doleful lamentations – a haunting keen that had him tipped for success, but one that clearly radiated the mental struggles that would lead to his tragic suicide in 1988. Written by Herion and produced by Dolby, this goth-tinged ballad emits an almost hallucinatory aura, both intensely moving and a sight unsettling.

STEVE HARNELL

1. **NEW ORDER** BLUE MONDAY
2. **DEPECHE MODE** ENJOY THE SILENCE
3. **HEAVEN 17** TEMPTATION
4. **YAZOO** SITUATION
5. **KRAFTWERK** COMPUTER WORLD
6. **ELECTRONIC** DISAPPOINTED
7. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** BEING BOILED
8. **JOHN FOXX** UNDERPASS
9. **NEW ORDER** TEMPTATION
10. **NIGHTCALL** KAVINSKY & LOVEFOXXX

38

HOWARD JONES

WHAT IS LOVE?

While more wholesome than many of the artists tabbed here, Howard Jones is a Godfather of (Synth) Pop if ever there was one. He managed a UK Top 5 at first attempt with the peppy *New Song* (his most successful satellite in the US), and the debut album from which it was mined – *Human's Lib* – went to the top of the charts. A further three hits quickly followed: the atmospheric *Hide And Seek*, the quirky magnificence of *Pearl In The Shell* and this, the album's most successful UK single. A clear bullseye.

RIK FLYNN

1. **PET SHOP BOYS** BEING BORING
2. **BRONSKI BEAT** SMALLTOWN BOY
3. **LES RYTHMES DIGITALES** SOMETIMES
4. **THE UNITS** HIGH PRESSURE DAYS
5. **THE CURE** THE WALK
6. **NEW ORDER** TRUE FAITH
7. **ELECTRONIC** DISAPPOINTED
8. **YMO** BEHIND THE MASK
9. **CHAIRLIFT** AMANAEMONESIA
10. **HOT CHIP** COLOURS

34

JOHN FOXX

UNDERPASS

When art student Dennis Leigh stumbled upon a synth at college, his interest was piqued. Investigations into the Italian futurists, John Cage and the Velvet Underground saw him reborn as Ultravox frontman John Foxx. Then, in 1979, he broke free to cut *Metamatic*, the solo album that enclosed this iconic debut. With JG Ballard-inspired dystopian themes and sparse, robotic tones all punctuated by a menacing synth motif, Foxx devised his own language from drum machines, pop music and plenty of synthesisers.

33

TALK TALK

IT'S MY LIFE

How the title track of Talk Talk's 1984 album missed Top 10s around the globe at the time of release seems totally bizarre in hindsight. Famously glum singer Mark Hollis may not have helped; not your typical synth-popper, he cited Otis Redding, Burt Bacharach and Can as influences over the usual modish name-drops of the period. But with Hollis' delicate tones, lyrics as bold as they were vulnerable and a soundbed of tough rhythm and searching synths, *It's My Life* eventually made the UK Top 20 when reissued in 1990.

32

BLANCMANGE

LIVING ON THE CEILING

Known affectionately by Mute's Daniel Miller as "the maiden aunts of electronic music", Blancmange showed their mettle with pilot EP *Irene & Mavis*, a lo-fi epic. Next came a cherished spot on the infamous Some Bizzare sampler, before inking a deal that led to the full-length *Happy Families* LP with this nailed-on classic as its centrepiece. The twosome called upon Indian musicians Pandit Dinesh and Deepak Khazauchi for an Eastern flavour, and they joined the duo to perform the eventual No. 7 hit on *Top Of The Pops*.

37

TELEX
MOSKOW DISKOW

Forged in 1979 by a trio of Belgian gentlemen using entirely electronic equipment (and complete with novelty train sounds), Telex can count themselves amongst the forefathers of synth-pop, and they also provided a prototype for techno – albeit with tongues firmly planted in cheeks. Their cover of Les Chats Sauvages' *Twist à St Tropez* is a must, as is their 1980 Eurovision entry, *Euro-Vision*, that pastiched the whole contest with the sole intention of coming last (they were beaten to the prize by Portugal). Masterful.

36

JAPAN
QUIET LIFE

Trading their gauche glam leanings for an artful, more austere sound, David Sylvian – with newfound deeper vocal strains – and his foppish suburbans eventually hit gold in the UK with this single on second attempt. The group's 1979 collaboration with Giorgio Moroder, *Life In Tokyo*, initiated the move to a more mannered path and drew out the blueprint for expansion into a world of exoticism and experimentation, with plenty of synths. Roxy Music collaborator John Punter produced the album of the same name.

35

YELLO
BOSTICH

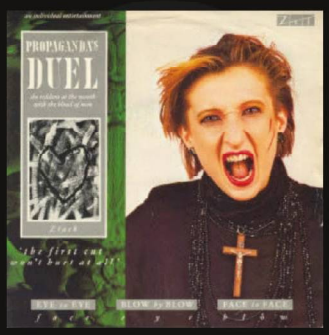
Debut single *I.T. Splash* set out Swiss duo Yello's stall as leftfield professors of sound, unafraid of a little humour here and there, and this frenetic three minutes of brilliance from 1980 LP *Solid Pleasure* maintained that idiosyncratic path. With percussive, oddball lyrics of man and machine, delivered over a soundtrack that lurches all over the shop, this somehow hit big on US black radio – "They thought we were two black guys rapping," said Boris Blank. Investigate the instigators and the fascination just grows.

JOHN EARLS

1. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** TWO DIVIDED BY ZERO
2. **SOFT CELL** TORCH
3. **YAZOO** DON'T GO
4. **EMPIRE OF THE SUN** DNA
5. **ERASURE** VICTIM OF LOVE
6. **INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS OF POP** AFTER DARK
7. **BLANCMANGE** LIVING ON THE CEILING
8. **JAIN** MAKEBA
9. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** FASCINATION
10. **MADONNA** HUNG UP

ANDY JONES

1. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** SOUND OF THE CROWD
2. **MOBILES** DROWNING IN BERLIN
3. **CAPTAIN SENSIBLE** SECRETS
4. **GARY NUMAN** PRAYER FOR THE UNBORN (ANDY GRAY MIX)
5. **JOHN FOXX** TOUCH AND GO
6. **DEPECHE MODE** STRIPPED
7. **DURAN DURAN** ORDINARY WORLD
8. **JAPAN** TAKING ISLANDS IN AFRICA
9. **CHINA CRISIS** THE SOUL AWAKENING
10. **NEW MUSIK** LIVING BY NUMBERS



31

PROPAGANDA
DUEL

Put together by Die Krupps' Ralf Dörper, Propaganda favoured the darker edges of pop over the industrial sounds of his previous incarnation. Relocated to the UK, and with Claudia Brücken at their head, they made initial waves with their debut 7" *Dr Mabuse* and signed to Trevor Horn's ZTT roster only to be sidelined when ZTT's attention (and cash) primed the pump for Frankie Goes To Hollywood's rapid rise. Debut album *A Secret Wish* was worth the wait, as this slanted slice of pop perfection emphatically proves.

30

THOMAS DOLBY
SHE BLINDED ME WITH SCIENCE

A 'synth-fanatic' ever since he rescued one from a dumpster at 19 years old, Dolby started life as producer/keyboardist for The Fallout Club. When a Japanese magazine bizarrely voted him 'Young Scientist of the Year', it was an image that stuck. With a wacky narrative about a 'home for deranged scientists' the voice of a BBC scientist, a synth bass straight out of New York and an oriental flavour drummed up on his Jupiter 6, the perennial *She Blinded Me With Science* was born.

29

ELECTRONIC
DISAPPOINTED

There aren't many items in this rundown that stem from beyond the 80s simply because the early days of synth-pop created a wealth of songs that frankly deserve their place. But when New Order's Bernard Sumner, guitarist Johnny Marr and Pet Shop Boys singer Neil Tennant clubbed together, expectation from synth-lovers was at fever pitch. They delivered immediately with the excellent No.12 UK hit *Getting Away With It*, but it was this fourth single that crowned the lot, reaching No.6 in a delicious wave of euphoria.

28

HEAVEN 17
TEMPTATION

Martyn Ware's pitch that he'd conceived a track based on the Lord's Prayer "with a never-ending chord structure" was met with howls of laughter, and yet, with a 60-piece orchestra to augment the tech, *Temptation* took off. LinnDrum-programmed Motown rhythms, fizzing sequencers and those escalating chords allowed Glenn Gregory and session singer Carol Kenyon to nail this ubiquitous ode to sex. Out in April 1983, it shifted 250,000 by March. Said Ware: "Things always kick off when *Temptation* comes on..."

27

YAZOO
DON'T GO

Exiting Depeche Mode after just one album when the group turned to darker climes for inspiration, Vince Clarke paired up with Basildon local Alison Moyet to form Yazoo. While shortlived, the duo would go on to fashion some of the finest soul-filled synth-pop in existence. There's highlights aplenty on their minimal classic *Upstairs At Eric's* LP, but the stirring marriage of Clarke's know-how and Moyet's passion-heavy take on second single *Don't Go* is, for us, a pinnacle of the era. The UK agreed: it made No.3.

26

SPARKS
THE NUMBER ONE SONG IN HEAVEN

Brothers Russell and Ron Mael allied with electro-disco genius Giorgio Moroder in the late 70s to fashion this seminal piece of future-embracing creativity. Wry theatrics, sky-scraping operatics and an eccentric air of otherness are the order of the day here, all underpinned by plenty of pulsing majesty. A Top 20 UK hit, *The Number One Song In Heaven* began the UK's lasting love affair with Sparks and birthed the classic duo dynamic – flamboyant singer, deadpan other half.

IAN RAVENDALE

1. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** HUMAN
2. **KRAFTWERK** THE MODEL
3. **DELAYS** SWALLOWING THE SILENCE
4. **SPARKS** THE NUMBER ONE SONG IN HEAVEN
5. **TALK TALK** IT'S MY LIFE
6. **OMD** SOUVENIR
7. **A-HA** THE SUN ALWAYS SHINES ON TV
8. **ULTRAVOX** VIENNA
9. **THE BUGGLES** VIDEO KILLED THE RADIO STAR
10. **YAZOO** ONLY YOU

ALEX DUCE

1. **DEPECHE MODE** ENJOY THE SILENCE
2. **YAZOO** SITUATION
3. **HEAVEN 17** TEMPTATION
4. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** THE LEBANON
5. **SOFT CELL** WAIFS & STRAYS (GRID TWILIGHT MIX)
6. **EURYTHMICS** THIS CITY NEVER SLEEPS
7. **BRONSKI BEAT** WHY?
8. **DEPECHE MODE** HALO (GOLDFRAPP REMIX)
9. **PET SHOP BOYS** HEART
10. **ERASURE** SOMETIMES

22

TUBEWAY ARMY
ARE FRIENDS ELECTRIC?

In Gary Numan's mind it had "no recognisable hook-line whatsoever", but nonetheless *Are Friends Electric?* unexpectedly propelled the UK's very own man machine to No.1 and into the public's consciousness. And while he may have famously stumbled across a Minimoog by accident, he had the nouse to recognise the possibilities. His about turn in sound made his record label see red, but Numan's noisy alien creation about a robot prostitute went ahead – and this particular happy accident sold a million.

21

DEPECHE MODE
EVERYTHING COUNTS

By 1983's *Construction Time Again*, Depeche Mode MkII were well into their stride with Alan Wilder entering the frame. The album was realised at John Foxx's ultra-hip Garden Studios in London and, while one of their less successful, it revealed a darker, deeper sonic bent – and some much improved lyrics. Highlight *Everything Counts* illustrated both: from sampled xylophone and Martin Gore and Dave Gahan's dual vocals to the mocking verse that satirised corporate greed. For *NME*, it was their finest moment thus far.

20

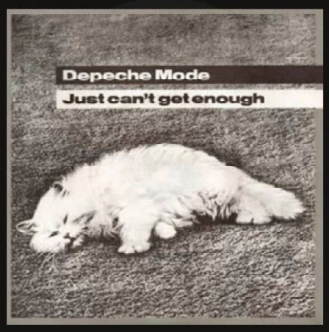
ERASURE
A LITTLE RESPECT

Ok, so it's got an acoustic guitar, but *A Little Respect* deserves... er... just that. Our shortlist took in tracks from throughout their career – *Oh L'Amour*, *Sometimes*, *Chains Of Love* and *Ship Of Fools*, and all four singles from 1990's analogue-only *Chorus* album, but this stone cold classic ultimately won out. Aside from showing off Andy Bell's spiralling vocal range, it's yet another Vince Clarke masterclass, from the chord pattern propelling it forward to the layered voicings that build to climatic crescendo.

25

NEW ORDER
BIZARRE LOVE TRIANGLE

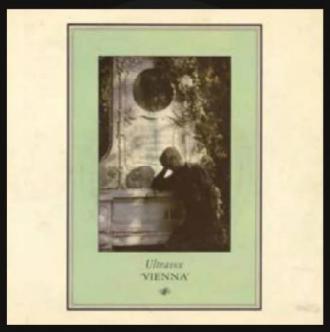
From early triumphs *Temptation*, *Blue Monday* and the squelchy goodness of *Everything's Gone Green* through to later delights such as *The Perfect Kiss* and *True Faith*, theirs is a discography chock full of tunes. This one juxtaposes effervescent, sequenced sparkles and flighty chord changes with lovestruck reflections on a relationship stuck in stalemate. The sole single from 1986's *Brotherhood*, *Bizarre Love Triangle* barely troubled the UK charts, but that matters not a jot with a song this good.



24

DEPECHE MODE
JUST CAN'T GET ENOUGH

Out of a residency at Basildon's Croc's disco, boyish foursome Depeche Mode emerged with a straight-up pop sensibility that maintained its cool. *Rolling Stone* dubbed 1981's debut LP *Speak & Spell* "tuneful pop", but its pacemaker single *New Life* hung together nicely, and follow-up *I Just Can't Get Enough* – ever-present and everlasting – revealed the mercurial talents of Clarke as an architect of faultless pop and gave his bandmates the confidence to fill the gigantic void left by his departure.



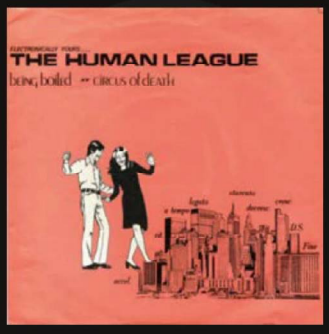
23

ULTRAVOX
VIENNA

If frequency of *Top Of The Pops* appearances denotes true greatness, then Ultravox should get a medal. And while we adore the harder edged John Foxx-fronted era, once Midge Ure took over the mic, the group really took off. 1981's *Rage In Eden* single *The Thin Wall* and 1983's *Dancing With Tears In My Eyes* were up for consideration, but *Vienna* simply cannot be ignored. Rather amusingly denied the top spot by Joe Dolce's novelty *Shaddup You Face*, this triggered a run of hits that was uninterrupted until the mid-80s.

IAN WADE

1. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** LOVE ACTION
2. **LCD SOUNDSYSTEM** SOMEONE GREAT
3. **SOFT CELL** MEMORABILIA
4. **NEW ORDER** TEMPTATION
5. **SHANNON** LET THE MUSIC PLAY
6. **PET SHOP BOYS** LEFT TO MY OWN DEVICES
7. **DEPECHE MODE** JUST CAN'T GET ENOUGH
8. **LADYTRON** DESTROY EVERYTHING YOU TOUCH
9. **YAZOO** ONLY YOU
10. **JAPAN** QUIET LIFE



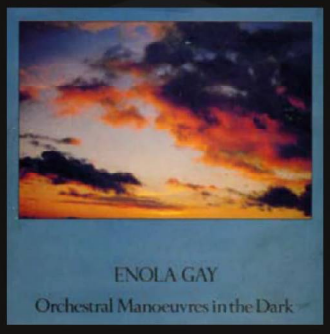
19

THE HUMAN LEAGUE
BEING BOILED

Right from their debut single The Human League dispensed with conventional instruments altogether. The original version embodied the DIY punk aesthetic, made for less than a fiver with two synths and a tape recorder – and picked up a fan in John Peel. The second version, recorded for the *Holiday '80* EP and with 'synthetic horns' added, was streamlined without being overcooked. Add frankly bizarre lyrics about Buddha, silk production and torture, and this is surely one of the strangest hits in chart history.

MARK LINDORES

1. **PET SHOP BOYS** BEING BORING
2. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** BEING BOILED
3. **VISAGE** FADE TO GREY
4. **ERASURE** YOU SURROUND ME
5. **DEPECHE MODE** A QUESTION OF LUST
6. **ALISON MOYET** LOVE RESURRECTION
7. **KYLIE MINOGUE** SLOW
8. **NEW ORDER** TRUE FAITH
9. **KRAFTWERK** THE MODEL
10. **GOLDFRAPP** STRICT MACHINE



18

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK
ENOLA GAY

OMD idolised Kraftwerk, but the nearest they could come to their heroes' bank of gadgets was a "rubbishy" keyboard bought via mail order. Still, the ever-resourceful duo managed to coax out *Enola Gay*'s signature riff in Paul Humphrey's living room. A "brazenly cheerful song" that harboured stark lyrics about the B-29 that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, it was aired at a time when anti-nuclear dissent was at a height and brought politics into the Top 10.

17

TEARS FOR FEARS
PALE SHELTER (YOU DON'T GIVE ME LOVE)

Obsessed by psychotherapist Arthur Janov and his primal scream therapy, Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith revisited traumatic childhoods to forge their unique debut album *The Hurting*. In it, they jettisoned their demons through tracks such as *Suffer The Children*, an ode to broken childhood innocence, and via morose masterpiece *Mad World*, charged with bleak observations of the day-to-day set to an 808… but it's this brutal portrayal of parental dereliction that hit hardest.

PAUL LESTER

1. **DAF** ALS WÄR'S DAS LETZTE MAL
2. **LIAISONS DANGEREUSES** LOS NINOS DEL PARQUE
3. **YELLO** BOSTICH
4. **GIORGIO MORODER** WHAT A NIGHT
5. **PROPAGANDA** THOUGHT
6. **HEAVEN 17** THE HEIGHT OF THE FIGHTING
7. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** ONLY AFTER DARK
8. **SPACE** MAGIC FLY
9. **YELLOW MAGIC ORCHESTRA** TECHNOPOLIS
10. **NEW ORDER** EVERYTHING'S GONE GREEN

ANDREW DINELEY

1. **THE SOUND OF ARROWS** INTO THE CLOUDS
2. **FIAT LUX** FEELS LIKE WINTER AGAIN
3. **YAZOO** ONLY YOU
4. **SOPHIE AND PETER JOHNSTON** TORN OPEN
5. **ERASURE** YOU SURROUND ME
6. **CHVRCHES** THE MOTHER WE SHARE
7. **SILICON TEENS** SUN FLIGHT
8. **NEW MUSIK** THIS WORLD OF WATER
9. **VENUS HUM** HUMMINGBIRDS
10. **BRIGHT LIGHT BRIGHT LIGHT** CRY AT FILMS

DOUGLAS MCPHERSON

1. **MEN WITHOUT HATS** SAFETY DANCE
2. **ULTRAVOX** VIENNA
3. **THE HUMAN LEAGUE** DON'T YOU WANT ME
4. **EURYTHMICS** SWEET DREAMS (ARE MADE OF THIS)
5. **THE BUGGLES** VIDEO KILLED THE RADIO STAR
6. **GODLEY & CREME** UNDER YOUR THUMB
7. **GARY NUMAN** CARS
8. **VISAGE** FADE TO GREY
9. **SOFT CELL** SAY HELLO, WAVE GOODBYE
10. **YAZOO** ONLY YOU

16

A-HA
TAKE ON ME

It took three years, three producers and three versions before Norwegian trio A-ha's masterstroke of inspiriting pop was fully realised. A first attempt in October 1984 bombed, as did a reboot a year later. Third time lucky; Magne Furuholmen's evergreen hook finally clicked on the iconic Juno 60 synthesiser, Pål Waaktaar-Savoy's programming prowess fell into the slot on the LinnDrum, and Morten Harkett was free to let loose a melody that skyrocketed to blissful falsetto crescendo. Add Steve Barron's pioneering rotoscope-video and blanket MTV play, and glory was theirs.

15

PET SHOP BOYS
IT'S A SIN

Pet Shop Boys' second No.1 came in 1987, but originated from those early demos made with Bobby Orlando back in 1984. Supplied a brief that it should be all about the drama, new producer Julian Mendelsohn obliged with a NASA countdown, a Catholic mass, orchestral stabs, choral chanting – and a bit of thunder for good measure. Lyrics that encapsulated Neil Tennant's memories of Catholic school, synths that hint at Italo disco grandeur and Stephen Hague's measured final mix meant *It's A Sin* held strong at the summit for three weeks solid.

12

SOFT CELL
SAY HELLO, WAVE GOODBYE

"We were a weird couple," said Dave Ball, "Marc, this gay bloke in make-up; and me, a big guy who looked like a minder." 1981's debut album *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* immersed listeners into the murky ambience of Soho nights, exposing a musical microcosm of come downs and bedsits that made an immediate mark. In amongst its shady cast and seditious themes, *Say Hello...* emerged a delicate moment of clarity amidst the noise. An unspectacular relationship set to stark sonics, this added heart to the waveforms.

Pet Shop Boys' second No.1 *It's A Sin* was all about the drama, so producer Julian Mendelsohn obliged with a NASA countdown, a Catholic mass, orchestral stabs, choral chanting – and a bit of thunder for good measure

14

VISAGE
FADE TO GREY

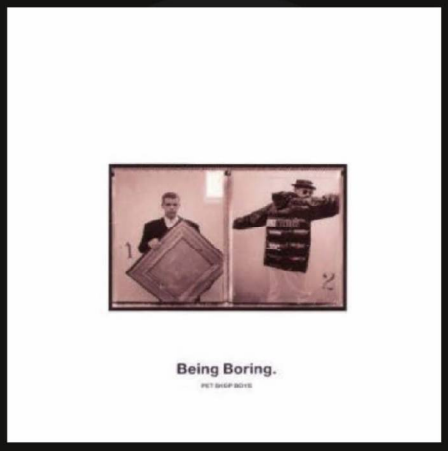
Fronted by flamboyant pleasure-seeker and Blitz club host Steve Strange, studio 'supergroup' Visage became a paragon of New Romantic glamour, but the group's straight-faced apogee *Fade To Grey* was, in fact, conceived as an instrumental by Billy Currie and Chris Payne while on a Gary Numan tour some time earlier. Added to the *Visage* album to make up the numbers, its axial pulsing synth was soon leading the way to the dancefloor, while its French spoken word part hinted at Strange's entourage of "the weird and wonderful".

Out of Martin Gore's funereal demo came one of Depeche Mode's finest moments, *Enjoy The Silence*. An old disco groove was lifted, a bassline and some atmospherics added, before Martin added *that* guitar part

13

YAZOO
ONLY YOU

When his old chums in Depeche Mode chose to pass, Vince Clarke called upon Alison Moyet to help demo his new song in the hope of saving his record deal. Turns out Moyet's deep and fervid tones provided the perfect conduit to raise Clarke's innocent melody up a notch, and Mute boss Daniel Miller suggested they release the track. What began for Alison "like an arranged marriage" quickly blossomed into a bona-fide duo when the track rose to No.2 (only kept from the summit by the Eurovison winner). Classic album *Upstairs At Eric's* would soon follow.



11

PET SHOP BOYS
BEING BORING

Neil Tennant's own 'Shangri-La', this sublime reflection on the nature of youth and the passing of time subtly evokes the sadness and wonderment of retrospection and loss, of love and freedom. Tennant's touching recollections glide gently over swelling synths: images of a lost childhood friend (Chris Dowell died in 1989 having contracted AIDS) contrasted poignantly with his own later success – a hint at survivor's guilt. For PSB the No.20 spot was a bit of a damp squib, but its understated charm grows with every listen.

10

THE HUMAN LEAGUE
LOVE ACTION (I BELIEVE IN LOVE)

Now straddled by two fresh-faced accomplices in Susan Ann Sulley and Joanne Catherall, Phil Oakey's high hopes for The Human League MkII were quickly substantiated when *Love Action* gave them a first UK Top 10, taking No.3 in summer 1981. A shimmering hook conjured up via some modular synth trickery put this firmly in the dancefloor-friendly 'red' section of their labelling system ('blue' being their poppier material). Part-autobiographical and with a nod to Lou Reed's *I Believe In Love* ("the old man"), this is pop alchemy.

09

DEPECHE MODE
ENJOY THE SILENCE

Out of Martin Gore's funereal demo – just plaintive pump organ and quivering voice – came one of Depeche's finest moments. Flood recalls Alan Wilder and Daniel Miller's idea that they revamp it into an uptempo disco track and (some time later, in the middle of nowhere in Denmark) they set about convincing a dubious Gore. An old disco groove was lifted, a bassline and some atmospherics added, before Martin added *that* guitar part. They all knew they had something special – albeit with a hefty nod to New Order.

08

NEW ORDER
BLUE MONDAY

The argument that *Blue Monday* is New Order's crowning synthesised moment is pretty watertight. Created as a way to get machines to play their encores – "Why not just press a button and go," as Bernhard Sumner once said – the track was inspired by the band's downtime spent on the New York club scene. An Oberheim DMX drum machine provided the iconic intro, Peter Hook lifted his bassline from an Ennio Morricone film soundtrack, Bernard did his best robot, and Peter Saville gave it the world's greatest sleeve. The result? The biggest selling 12" of all time.

07

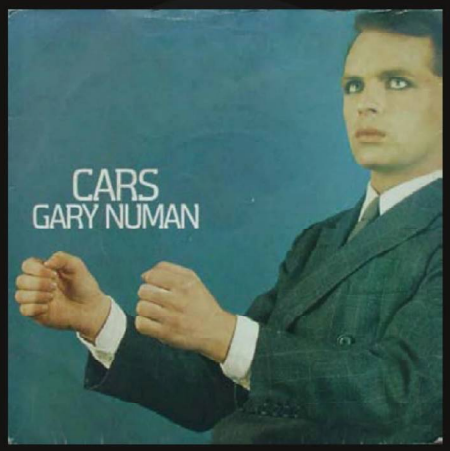
PET SHOP BOYS
WEST END GIRLS

"*West End Girls* starts with some feet walking down the street and then strings come in," said Neil Tennant, "in our heads, like the beginning of a film." Pet Shop Boys arrived with an ethos of setting real life against beautiful, danceable music – and in sync with the invention of the Emulator sampler. As a result, the track was constructed entirely of samples, with vocals shadowing TS Eliot's modernist multi-voiced poem *The Waste Land* and with city life (and hip hop) as its inspiration. The 'Boys second attempt, now with producer Stephen Hague on board, went to the top.

06

BRONSKI BEAT
SMALLTOWN BOY

The first offering from 1984's *The Age Of Consent* album goes far beyond the trappings of synth-pop. Here, Bronski Beat concocted a call to arms against homophobia that still resonates. Jimmy Somerville's towering falsetto possesses those feelings of fear, anger, isolation, rejection and loneliness entirely, while the synth's lachrymose top line somehow mirrors the pain. Inspiring the masses to dance – and think – simultaneously, while encapsulating the experience of being gay in the 1980s, *Smalltown Boy* is pretty much perfect.



05

GARY NUMAN
CARS

With Tubeway Army gone and the trad band set-up ousted along with it, Gary Numan homed in on synths as his sole focus. Inspired by a road-raging mob, Numan's joyous solo debut glorified the automobile as the ultimate refuge from the outside world, while lionising the iconic Polymoog synth. And an astute ear to the hit parade meant *Cars* made No. 1 in 1979, planted the medium firmly into the mainstream and gave the UK its first kohl-eyed synth-pop poster boy. A hit in three decades, it's aged exceptionally well.

04

SWEET DREAMS
EURYTHMICS

Dave Stewart at the controls of a new drum machine that refused to yield, Annie Lennox roused by said unruly rhythm and the resultant synth sparring session that ensued... therein lay a serendipitous moment of inspiration that would force the door wide open for the duo. Add lyrics addressing Lennox's nihilistic state of mind and a potent and cooly-delivered melody, and it took but an hour to create one of the genre's most timeless hits. The dreams could only have been sweeter had Bonnie Tyler not deprived them of the top spot.

03

KRAFTWERK
THE MODEL

It arrived like the sorest of thumbs in 1981, gracefully unsaddling Shakin' Stevens for UK No.1. The hipper amongst us had fallen for its charms on 1978's *The Man Machine* album, but *Das Model* picked up traction once translated into English and given A-side status. The sonic revolution they'd set in motion was in full flight at that point, but nothing compared to Ralf Hütter emoting robotically over synths that dutifully cloned his beguiling top line. Their prototype come full circle, it ensured rightful glory for Düsseldorf's finest.

02

THE HUMAN LEAGUE
DON'T YOU WANT ME

Yes, we've all heard it more times than we can remember, but The Human League's 1981 mega-hit has developed ubiquitous status for good reason. It's an undeniably iconic seven inches of synth-pop – and it would be the track we'd play the aliens if they were to descend into our backyard demanding an explanation of the time when the Earth suddenly shifted its weight to the sound of synths.

> *Don't You Want Me* is the track we'd play the aliens if they were to descend into our backyard to demand an explanation of the time Earth shifted its weight to the sound of synths

Producer Martin Rushent took control of the rough early *Don't You Want Me* demo, adding a drum machine, a bassline and a basic synth. Oakey's vocal went on early (it was recorded in the toilet). Then it was time for Sulley and Catherall who, being new to this singing lark, were extremely nervous, and dozens of takes were needed. Finally, the polish was added by Rushent and Jo Callis. Job done.

When Virgin's Simon Draper suggested that the song should be the fourth single from the *Dare* album, however, he was met with blank faces. As far as the band was concerned, it was one of their weaker creations – so much so that it had been demoted to the tail-end of the record. The worry was that the public would tire of yet more Human League… but, for once, the label got it right. This boy-girl narrative set to synth made an immediate impression, slipping into the UK Top 10 in its first week, before storming the summit in the next.

The timing was impeccable. When the Steve Barron-directed video reached MTV, it immediately received copious airplay. Released in November 1981, it was Virgin's first No.1 and would become the UK's biggest seller of the year, snatching the Billboard No.1 in the next. Meanwhile, on a New York dancefloor, it was an epiphany for a young wannabe named Madonna Louise Ciccone.

01

NEW ORDER
TRUE FAITH

If *Don't You Want Me* takes the role as synthpop's spokesperson, then this is its cooler cousin. Released as a standalone single, *True Faith* was written both to enhance interest in the band's soon-to-be-released compilation album *Substance 1987*, and with the express purpose of breaking America. Hotshot producer Stephen Hague was called upon to take up the reigns off the back of his success with Pet Shop Boys, and they were given just 10 days to pull off the feat.

> Not only was *True Faith* a favourite of the dearly departed Tony Wilson, but it hit the UK Top 5 twice, broke the band in the States and sent them into the stratosphere

Scant live instruments included hi-hats, cymbals, Gillian Gilbert's keyboards and some choice high-end bass parts from Peter Hook that were consigned to play a supporting role to the ever-present programmed bass – and almost didn't make the cut (Hague later regretted mixing Hooky's parts so low in the mix). Meanwhile, Bernard completed the lyrics having been accidentally locked in the band's rented flat with no phone and no food.

B-side and fan favourite *1963* was recorded in the same session and almost took the glory, but it was *True Faith* that got the final vote. Coupled with an utterly gorgeous sleeve fashioned by Peter Saville using Trevor Key's photograph, and Philippe Decoufflé's iconic video – incorporating choreographed face-slapping, reverse footage, some brilliant otherworldly costumery and tasteful shots of the band – and the deal was done. Not only was *True Faith* a favourite of dearly departed Factory impresario Tony Wilson, but it hit the UK Top 5 in both 1987 and when it was re-released as a remix in 1994. Plus, of course, it did the job and broke the band in the States, finally giving them that elusive US Billboard hit – and sending the band into the stratosphere.

EVERYBODY DANCE

SO THE 90S SPELT THE END OF SYNTH-POP, RIGHT? THAT'S WHAT YOU MIGHT THINK, BUT *CLASSIC POP* ARGUES THAT, ACTUALLY, THE 90S WAS A DECADE THAT WAS SHAPED BY SYNTH-POP, AND IT EVENTUALLY CONTRIBUTED TO THE GENRE IN MIGHTY SWATHES... **ANDY JONES**

There are many that may feel that the start of the 90s meant early closure for synth-pop. After all, the godfathers of the genre had to make way for a new breed of synth users and abusers at the end of the 80s, as those Roland synths and drum machines – so prominent on early synth-pop hits by Depeche Mode, The Human League and many others – were taken up by an altogether different, but no less cutting-edge generation of gear geeks. They made the machines squeal, they added a four-four beat and dance music was born, not leaving much room for anyone with old romantic leanings. But, as we'll see – or at least argue – dance music eventually fed back to the genre that spawned it. But that didn't help many of the former synth-poppers at the time...

WHERE ARE THEY NOW? (OR WHERE WERE THEY THEN?)

The Human League, of course, defined so much of 80s synth-pop, and it was perhaps inevitable that they would be cast aside in the 90s. With grunge, dance music and Madchester making synth-pop suddenly sound so quaint, the League were dropped not only by their long-standing record company, Virgin, but also by bandmates Adrian Wright and Ian Burden. However, picked up and dusted down by East West Records, the remaining trio of Phil Oakey, Joanne Catherall and Susan Ann Sulley hit the charts once more with *Tell Me When* and *One Man In My Heart*. At the end of the decade, the band took the touring route and still tread the nostalgia circuit boards to this day.

Gary Numan was, of course, also one of the flag-bearers of synth-pop, but his 90s started out as badly as the end of his 80s. He was still trying to fuse synths, funk and rock, but the combination didn't sit well with his fans... nor him, come to that. 1992's *Machine + Soul* was a low point; *the* low point. At least the previous album, *Outland*, had *Blade Runner* samples on it; this one had Prince covers. Fortunately the mid-90s saw Numan forging ahead towards a new, rockier and darker synth sound that has since brought him right back in vogue.

Other iconic synth-pop acts enjoyed just as mixed fortunes, especially OMD, whose decade was a game of two halves. Andy McCluskey was the only original member left in the band since their 1989 split, and he enjoyed success with the albums *Sugar Tax*, *Liberator* and *Universal* – and even bothered the charts with singles including *Sailing On The Seven Seas* and *Walking On The Milky Way*. However, he would cite the rise of Britpop as being the main reason he decided to call it a day for OMD in 1996, to go and pen hits for Atomic Kitten, although OMD eventually reformed in 2006.

While John Foxx's *Metamatic* remains one of the starkest synth-pop albums ever, by the 90s he was retired. Gone. Disappeared. Actually, he simply switched back to his other persona, artist Dennis Leigh, but the dance music that shaped the decade had a hand in the return of Foxx; after hearing what the sounds of his machines were doing with dance, he was inspired to make a 1997 comeback and his renewed love of music has since resulted in an extraordinary range of releases; we have a lot to thank dance music for...

THE OLD ORDER

One massive football tune, a split, five years off and then a reformation. That just about sums up New Order's 90s – a typical decade for them, you might say. After the highs of *World In Motion*, Bernard Sumner formed Electronic with Johnny Marr while Stephen Morris and Gillian Gilbert formed The Other Two. The next New Order album, *Republic*, hit No.1 but would be the band's last of the decade as they concentrated on side projects. They reconvened and agreed to play live together at the end of the decade and the rest, as they say, is quite complicated.

Dropped by their label in 1992, the remaining Human League trio wavered before gathering themselves to work with Yellow Magic Orchestra and finding a new deal – and lease of life – with *Octopus* and a greatest hits compilation

THE PLAYERS

THE ARTISTS WHO SHAPED THE NEW SYNTH SOUND OF THE 90s...

DAFT PUNK

While the 90s would see Daft Punk exploring everything from house music to big beat, it also saw the French duo performing at Tribal Gathering with the best that synth-pop (Kraftwerk) and dance music (Orbital) had to offer. By the end of the decade they started work on *Discovery*, their second album, with a focus more on synth-pop and eventual sales of around three million. It would set a new benchmark and act as the perfect base on which to attain world domination over the following decades.

DEPECHE MODE

The band that gave us very much the pure version of synth-pop in the 80s were anything but pure in the 90s. With Gahan starting to look and act a little like Jesus, it is perhaps apt that he – and the band – both died (albeit for just a couple of minutes in his case) and rose again during the decade. Long time member Alan Wilder departed and Gahan's heroin addiction nearly tore the band apart but their 90s will hopefully be remembered more for the classic albums *Violator* (1990) and the darker, grungier *Songs Of Faith And Devotion* (1993) – both Depeche Mode must-haves that propelled the band into a world of success that few other acts can even dream of.

MADONNA

Synth-pop saved Madonna or Madonna saved synth-pop, you decide. In this decade she appeared to be doing whatever she could to deflect attention away from her music via the *Sex* book, the films, the relationships, and the headlines. Sure, there were hit singles and albums but, musically, her output required focus. Tapping into UK dance music, she partnered with William Orbit to produce her poppiest masterpiece: *Ray of Light*. It gave us perfect synth-pop (not to mention 16 million album sales).

MOBY

We're highlighting Moby as this man had his feet in so many of the splendid music camps of the 90s. He started out doing proper dance music extremes, both rave and chillout, before delivering his finest work in *Play*, one of the most popular synth and soulful albums ever released (although it ended up soundtracking rather *too* many adverts).

PET SHOP BOYS

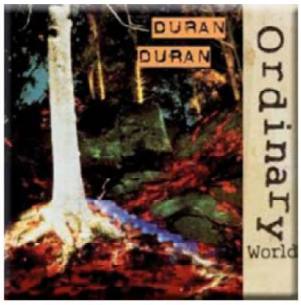
While many of their peers from the 80s floundered, here was one band that kept the torch lit for synth-pop in the 90s, and in as many extravagant, outlandish and unexpected ways as you could wish for. Indeed, was there anything that Pet Shop Boys *didn't* do in this decade? There were hit albums (including *Behaviour* hitting No.2 in 1990 and *Very* No.1 in 1993) and there were (lots of) collaborations – Bowie, Kylie, Dusty, Robbie, Bernie and Johnny (Electronic) – plus a huge world tour... and Glasto.

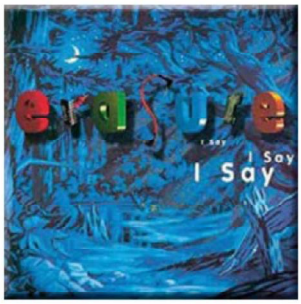
"The songs sound a lot harder, not just in a rocky way, but they are a lot more edgy in terms of sound and feeling" – Dave Gahan on *Violator*

THE BAND THAT GAVE US THE PURE VERSION OF SYNTH-POP IN THE 80S WERE ANYTHING BUT PURE IN THE 90S, BUT *VIOLATOR* AND *SONGS OF FAITH AND DEVOTION* PROPELLED DEPECHE MODE INTO A WORLD OF SUCCESS

© Photoshot/Avalon

Elsewhere there were occasional flashes of brilliance from other synth starlets. Duran Duran more endured than enjoyed much of the 90s, although 1993's *Ordinary World* and *Come Undone* remain two of their finest moments. Japan were responsible for one of the finest synth-pop albums ever made with *Gentlemen Take Polaroids* but, by 1991, they had split, reformed under the name Rain Tree Crow and split again. They would spend much of the decade bouncing around on each other's recordings as duos or trios but never again a quartet, and whatever their wide and varied output, you could never really call it synth-pop. Ultravox had survived one lead singer, John Foxx, leaving in the late 70s, but couldn't carry on without a second. Midge Ure had left in 1988 leaving Billy Currie as the only original member. Despite his best efforts the band fizzled out in 1996 – although, like a million 80s bands before them, they reformed in the 2000s.





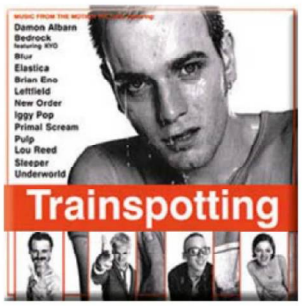
It wasn't all bad news for the old guard. Erasure opened the decade up with one of their finest albums, *Chorus*, and followed it up with *I Say I Say I Say*, both UK No.1s. Pet Shop Boys too had a great decade in which they pretty much conquered the world – see our tribute on the opposite page. However, this synth town wasn't really big enough for both dance and pop, and the decade, thus far, was a pretty turbulent one if you were a synth-pop fan. What to do? Why... dance, of course.

EXIT PLANET POP

As badly as many of the synth acts from the 80s might have been faring in the 90s, there was no doubting their legacy – synth-pop had after all laid the very foundation of dance music. Trace the history of dance music, and you'll be looking down the time tunnel at a quartet of robots from Dusseldorf. Such is the almost religious worship of Kraftwerk now, historians might well look back at those German electricians and concur that they invented all modern music, but what can't be argued was the band's influence on the dance genre. They helped plant the seeds of Chicago house, which then spread eastwards to Ibiza, Sheffield and London, and suddenly repetitive beats were everywhere. The late 80s might have contained them to fields around the M25, but in the 90s they exploded, became legal, legitimate, and huge business.

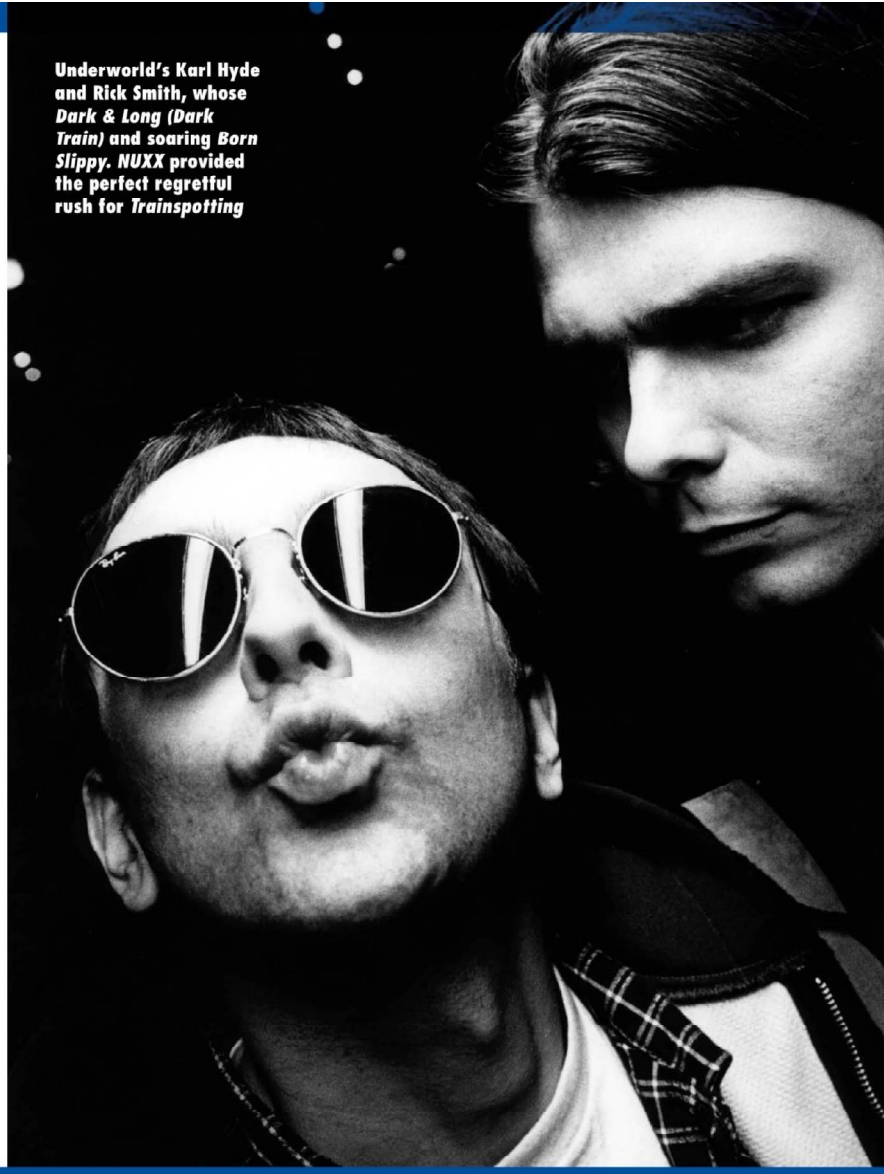
Realising their influence, Kraftwerk decided to finally leave Kling Klang studios and stop working on the album that would never be, and take a

peek at what they'd created. They chose to headline some of the legendary dance festivals in the 90s as if to prove a point: "You think you did it first, kids? Just listen to this..." But the kids *were* taking over and running with the synth baton. The charge was led by the UK, with many a dance act looking like they'd spent far too much time hunched over Roland drum machines... probably because they had.



DIRECT DESCENDANTS?

All the time, though, there were nods back to synth-pop in dance music. One of the biggest dance acts of all time, Underworld, can even trace a direct route back to a synth-pop incarnation, the band Freur (actually a Prince-like symbol), who released the classic but underrated synth-pop single *Doot Doot* back in 1983. And most of this new wave of dance artists could, and did, trail their influences and electronic leanings back to Numan, Foxx et al, so we could easily argue that some of these new dance stars were really just doing electronic pop for a new generation of ravers.



Underworld's Karl Hyde and Rick Smith, whose *Dark & Long (Dark Train)* and soaring *Born Slippy. NUXX* provided the perfect regretful rush for *Trainspotting*

ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

WHILE RAVE RULES, A PANOPLY OF POPPERS PRODUCE POLISHED PERFECTION

DEPECHE MODE

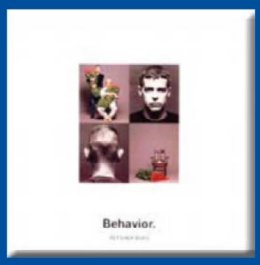
VIOLATOR (1990)

Don't look to the 80s for the best synth-pop album ever made, because this – complete with four massive singles – is not only Depeche Mode's finest hour but also (okay, arguably) the entire genre's. So polished, perfect and timeless was this record that the band turned to grunge, drugs and long hair soon afterwards, probably knowing they'd never match its girth again.

AIR

MOON SAFARI (1998)

Like a slowed-down Daft Punk, Air drifted around dance, chillout and pop with *Moon Safari*. It isn't deep, it isn't timeless, but Nicolas Godin and Jean Benoit's album hit a warmly satisfying chord with no little thanks to the vocal stylings of Beth Hirsch, and it ultimately claims a place in 90s history thanks to a couple of million sales... and for bringing the vocoder back into fashion.



PET SHOP BOYS

BEHAVIOUR (1990)

Behaviour, recorded with producer Harold Faltermeyer, is in equal parts as irritating as it is mesmerising... but isn't that PSB all over? (Indeed, you suspect they wouldn't have it any other way). For every hi-tempo *Where The Streets Have No Name*, they balance it with a *Being Boring*. How Can You Expect To Be Taken Seriously, you might ask. Who cares, they reply.

ERASURE

CHORUS (1991)

Chorus, which went No.1 and nabbed four Top 20 hits, is Erasure at their very best: songwriting gems, perfect production, exceptional-sounding synths (Clarke binned MIDI and relied heavily upon analog keyboards) and, of course, some of the catchiest tunes ever in the form of *Chorus*, *Breath Of Life* and *Love To Hate You*. "Sending shivers up and down my spine..." Indeed.

ELECTRONIC

ELECTRONIC (1991)

Take the best bits of New Order and Pet Shop Boys and add a bit of Johnny Marr and you can't go wrong, right? The press thought so: "Swirling magnificence," cooed *Melody Maker*, "one of the greatest albums ever made." Actually this super-band debut does misfire on occasion, but *Getting Away With It* and *Get The Message* are worth 'Getting' it for alone. Get it?

© Paul Bergen/Redferns

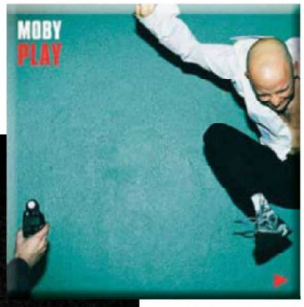
Certainly many of the big names in dance easily made the jump from the Tribal Gatherings of the time to Glastonbury and thence into the pop charts. There were memorable performances by the likes of Orbital, Chemical Brothers and The Prodigy across the decade, but Underworld stole the chart honours with the help of a little bit of *Trainspotting*. That film propelled a bunch of actors, a director and that dance act into orbit, all shouting about "lager" on the journey upwards.

Meanwhile Leftfield's *Leftism*, The Prodigy's *Fat Of The Land*, Orbital's 'Brown' album and pretty much anything by Massive Attack became the albums of the decade; indeed now albums of the genre. Was dance music the new synth-pop, though? Not really, but it was popular and had lots of synths in it – and it did eventually give back.

THE SYNTH MUSIC OF THE 90s WAS NEVER GOING TO EMULATE THE SUCCESS OF ITS GODFATHERS, BUT EXPERIMENTAL ACTS WERE PREPARING THE WORLD FOR A NEW CENTURY COMEBACK

SYNTH-POP MK2

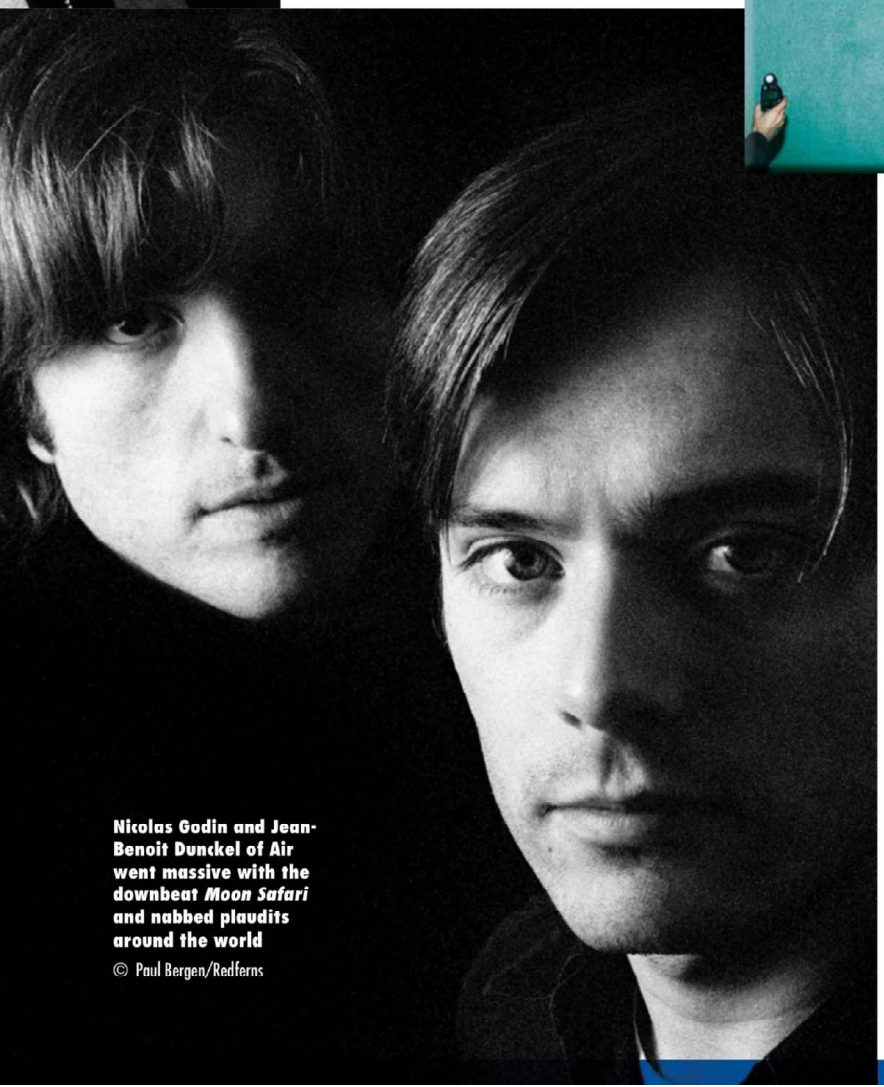
Towards the end of the decade, when dance music grew up, exploded, became uncool or all of the above, the genre started to go forth and multiply. It has given us many different shades over recent decades, but in the 90s it gave us a rich and cool, more downbeat version, something for the end of the evening, or indeed the end of the morning: in other words, chillout. The gentle wafts of Air, The Orb, Röyksopp and more were its flag bearers and often produced incredible synth-laden gems. However, they were just the start.



A new generation of electronic pop was finally heralded in by a diminutive American star and in response dozens of cutting-edge electricians would take and rework the electronic music genre for a new century. Moby marked out his dance career with the manic rave track *Go*, but ended the 90s with the sublime *Play* – 12 million copies and counting. He wasn't the only artist who fed off the dance music movement to take the synth onwards, though. Under the surface of the mainstream there was the pretentiously-titled Intelligent Dance Music scene, a huge umbrella that covered just about anything on the fringes of electronic music: the chilled end of dance, the edgier side of electro, or even the glum side of post-rock. We're not talking much of an attempt at synth-pop here, of course – this was sophisti-pop… with keyboards.

IDM started out defining whatever was on Warp Records and ended up being used by many a lazy journalist – this one included – to describe anything and everything: from the chin-stroking, drone-like lounge of Stereolab to the lush arrangements of Lamb; from the mesmerising offerings of Autechre to the psychedelic electronica of The Future Sound of London; from the knob-twirling bounce of LFO to the frankly chameleon-like Aphex Twin; and from the worshipped broke-tronica of Boards of Canada to the sampling genius of DJ Shadow. Really, this was the sound of a wide spread of very different electronic music, but the 90s did very much enjoy inventing genres and sub-genres, and we all loved putting the music in one pot or another.

When all is said and done though, the synth music of the 90s was never going to emulate the success and be as 'poppy' as its godfathers, but these more experimental acts still took some influence from the genre and were prodding its edges, exploring its depths and preparing the world for a new century comeback. Dance music ruled the decade, perhaps – and it certainly showed us a dirtier side of the synth – but there were plenty of other acts, 'intelligent' or otherwise, simmering away and keeping the machines warm and ready to go again for when the new century dawned… ■



Nicolas Godin and Jean-Benoit Dunckel of Air went massive with the downbeat *Moon Safari* and nabbed plaudits around the world

© Paul Bergen/Redferns

CLASSIC ALBUM

VIOLATOR

DEPECHE MODE

AT THE DAWN OF THE NINETIES, DEPECHE MODE WERE HUGE. THEIR SEVENTH FULL-LENGTH PROJECT *VIOLATOR* WAS AN INSPIRED BLEND OF SYNTH-POP AND ROCK WITH GOTHIC SENSIBILITIES, SPAWNING NO LESS THAN FOUR GLOBALLY SUCCESSFUL SINGLES AND GOING ON TO BECOME A LANDMARK ALBUM...

ANDY JONES

Over time, Depeche Mode might well be judged as being as important as The Beatles. The band is fast approaching four decades in music-making, and in that time have spread the word of synth, married it to rock, sold a gazillion albums and singles and become the electronic Rolling Stones – only whereas The Stones arguably stopped making great albums mere years into their history, the Mode have made many, well into theirs. And the best of them all is *Violator*, the band's *Revolver*, a peak of creativity that introduced their trademark synth tones to the world of rock music.

Previous albums had seen the Depeche output mature from its pop sound (on 1981's debut album *Speak & Spell* and on its follow-up *A Broken Frame*), through the industrial sample-laden *Construction Time Again* to the darker, more thoughtful trio of *Some Great Reward, Black Celebration* and *Music For The Masses*. With six varied albums already released in the Eighties, with a bigger following than any other in the world right then, what were Depeche to do as the decade closed? They would record their best album to date.

Violator was recorded in Milan and Denmark and mixed in London by François Kevorkian, who had previously worked on Kraftwerk's 1986 album *Electric Café*. This globe-trotting might sound like a complicated process, but the band had every intention of making it as simple as possible – at least, at the outset…

"We wanted to take a different direction with this album, for the songs to come across in a more direct way and not to be so fussy," Gahan said in an interview shortly after sessions at Puk Studios in Denmark, where they finished recording before *Violator* was mixed in London.

"We didn't want to be so critical about things and wanted to get more of an energy on to tape when we were recording, rather than play around with sounds for so long that by the time it came to recording, you'd have forgotten about the original direction of the song.

"So we wanted to work a lot faster but, in fact, we've probably taken more time, as you end up experimenting more until you find the right direction for the song!

"But the songs sound a lot harder, not just in a rocky way, but they are a lot more edgy in terms of sound and feeling."

It was a point he reiterated to MTV in 1990: "We didn't want it to be so cluttered, we wanted it to be more direct. We worked with Flood [aka Mark Ellis], who helped us a lot. He steered us in a direction that we were trying to find but didn't even know ourselves."

Indeed, Flood and long-time Depeche Mode band member Alan Wilder's input cannot be understated. The two worked tirelessly during the album sessions to provide the atmospheric frameworks within which Martin Gore's songs for *Violator* sat.

There was another factor that led to the success of the recording. Kevin May, the author of *HALO*, a book about the making of *Violator*, reveals: "Martin Gore, who was still the sole songwriter in Depeche at that point, said years later *Violator* was the last time they had fun making a record. It shines a light on the mood of the band at the time and, in particular, the excitement that was being generated with what was then a new producer in Flood and how they were approaching the entire process. He saw an opportunity to marry the band's core synth sound with 'traditional' instruments and really pushed a new tactic for the band, urging Gore to strip his demos back to as basic a form as possible so that they would be more open to manipulation – essentially allowing Alan Wilder and Flood to add atmospheres, melody, percussion and other elements."

"It needed another perspective," Mute Records owner and band mentor Daniel Miller told *Electronic Beats*, "and Flood is technically very good, very musical,

© Photoshot/Avalon

Andy Fletcher, Dave Gahan, Martin Gore and Alan Wilder hit a peak in 1990 with the multi-platinum *Violator*

"We worked with Flood, who helped us a lot. He steered us in a direction that we were trying to find but didn't even know ourselves. He helped develop the songs into something that maybe we wouldn't have done before" **DAVE GAHAN**

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED 19 March 1990

LABEL
Mute Records Ltd. (UK) and Sire/Reprise (US)

PRODUCED BY
Flood and Depeche Mode

ENGINEERS
Alan Gregorie, Dennis Mitchell, Goh Hotoda, Peter Iversen, Phil Legg, Pino Pischetola and Steve Lyon

RECORDED AT
Logic Studios, Puk Studios, The Church, Master Rock Studios, Axis

PERSONNEL
Dave Gahan – lead vocals; Martin Gore – Composer, vocals, synthesiser; Andrew Fletcher – synthesiser; Alan Wilder – synthesiser; François Kevorkian – mixing

TRACK BY TRACK

1 WORLD IN MY EYES

Described as one of Depeche Mode's "sexiest" songs, *World In My Eyes* sums up the mood of the band at the point of recording *Violator;* all were involved and working in perfect unity. It originated from a Gore demo, as most Mode songs do, of course, but its evolution in the studio was a dramatic one. Not only that, but all the band contributed vocals – a rare occurrence, and perhaps one that signified the unity and friendship that ran through the Depeche Mode camp at the time.

2 SWEETEST PERFECTION

Interestingly, *Sweetest Perfection* could well have been a Gahan-led song, according to the lead singer. "There are songs on the album where I might have sung, but Martin did instead," Gahan told MTV in 1990. "*Sweetest Perfection* is a song that maybe I would have sung." This swapping of traditional roles on *Violator* was intentional – partly because Flood bought a 'no rule book' approach to the recording of the album. In this case, *Sweetest Perfection* was originally more suited to Gahan, but Gore sang it (the opposite happened on the later track *Waiting For The Night*). *Sweetest Perfection* is probably not the finest track on the album, but in context it's still great. It builds to an almost psychedelic conclusion, complete with filtered beats and layers of atmosphere – "the kind of thing you resort to when you haven't really got an ending," Wilder recalls. Not the strongest track, perhaps, but certainly a timeless one.

3 PERSONAL JESUS

"Obviously, it has religious overtones," Gahan said in 1990, "but the idea for the song actually came from when we were touring America. When you are in America, there are all these TV channels where you switch on and there is someone trying to sell you some sort of religion and you usually have to pay like $20 or something and then they send you your own personal rainbow or whatever you want to call it. These sorts of people seem to be very hypocritical of their own religion. To be a Christian or whatever is supposed to be private, and you find something that is important to you. It's also when you are at your most vulnerable that you turn to religion, so these sorts of people who take money from those who ring up who just need someone to talk to, it just seems all twisted and wrong – that's why Martin wanted to write the song, because he felt this was making a mockery of the Christian movement." Martin was also apparently inspired by how Priscilla Presley had described her relationship with Elvis. Either way, the song caused enough controversy to help make it become one of Depeche Mode's biggest hits around the world (No.13 in the UK, No.28 in the States). It also had a guitar riff, one of the first Mode tracks to feature one so prominently. The song was famously covered by Marilyn Manson and Johnny Cash (separately, not together) and, not so famously, by Tori Amos plus many others.

4 HALO

Halo is one of the unsung heroes of *Violator*, perhaps because it sits in the shadow of *...Jesus* (the song, that is). Yet of the two, *Halo* has actually worn far better over the following 28 years. It's Depeche Mode at their best, with a stomping electronic intro (the bass produced from two classic synths, an ARP and Minimoog) and a searing string-laden chorus. Alan Wilder states on his own Recoil website that it is one of his favourite tracks from the album. "I like the string arrangement and the fact that we used drum loops on it – something we had hardly done before that time."

5 WAITING FOR THE NIGHT

The low-key *Waiting For The Night* is an astonishing Depeche Mode track for many reasons, not least because such a simple arrangement resulted in such a memorable track. It was also one of the few completely shared vocal tracks that Gahan and Gore have been credited with. "It was a song that Martin would possibly have sung," said Gahan, "but is actually a duet between us. I just phoned him up and said 'I really like the song, can I sing on it?'"

With that stunning arrangement, it's Flood and Alan Wilder that once again steal the show. "Flood and I had been listening to Tangerine Dream and decided to try and create a similar atmosphere," Alan Wilder says on shunt3.0.recoil.co.uk. "The main sequence was put together using his ARP and the sequencer that accompanies the synth. The charm of the ARP sequencer stems from the slight tuning and timing variations that occur each time the part is played. This gives a sense of fluidity and continual change, which seems to suit the song."

and very open. He's not 'This is the way it has to be,' it's more 'How can we do it differently?' He was in sync with the band's mentality – and my own."

Flood, it seems, was a perfect producer to offer a fresh approach, combining electronics and traditional sounds. Martin Gore, the album's songwriting architect, however, downplays his own talents: "I don't have a natural process," he told MTV in 1990, "I just sit down and write a song. Words come, melodies come and that's it."

The album that came afterwards, *Songs Of Faith And Devotion,* is often hailed as the other Mode masterpiece – although the egos spawned by success, drugs and rock'n'roll nearly swallowed their owners. "During *Violator*, the band managed to keep their feet on the ground," points out May. "While they had an inkling early on that they were creating something important, unique and creative, they were extremely down to earth and often didn't appear to understand how big they were becoming. This is perhaps difficult to believe, given the success of the previous records and tours... yet they were still young and, at least outwardly, had largely avoided the trappings of fame."

After the recording, Kevorkian mixed the album. "He's one of the most intense people I know," Miller told *Electronic Beats*. "He would work for 18 hours a day and I think he got through at least three different engineers, because they couldn't take it. He's so obsessive and so brilliant, and made a great record in *Violator*."

Miller made a very important contribution to the final recording, remixing an early version of *Enjoy The Silence* with engineer Phil Legg. "I think they were so burned out by the end – it took a long time making that record – that they said: 'Okay, whatever you say,' and they used that version," Miller says.

All four singles from *Violator* charted around the globe, while the album even scored a No.2 in the UK – the home country finally embracing its own band. The World Violation Tour followed, one as crazy and excessive as anything that had gone before. Over 88 dates, the band played to 1.2 million people. The experience would wipe the Mode out for a while and it would be two years until they got their breath back to reform for *Songs Of Faith And Devotion*. "A lot of things happened to the individuals in the band during and after the *Violator* tour," Miller told *Electronic Beats*. "They never changed as people, but they'd been elevated into superstars... and that does have an effect."

May adds: "Gahan had moved to Los Angeles and found his life being consumed by a heroin habit, as well as falling in with the emerging grunge scene and sound; and there was a general feeling that Flood and Wilder wanted to push the musical style that they had generated on *Violator* even further, using full segments of live musical performance in the recording."

Where everything came together so well for *Violator*, it fell apart for *SOFAD* – yet its success couldn't have happened without the experiences of the preceding album. Even though the styles and the experiences of recording them are so different, the two are intrinsically linked.

"*Violator* laid the foundations for when things started going wrong, structurally," May agrees, "but that is often what

6 ENJOY THE SILENCE/ INTERLUDE #2 (CRUCIFIED)

"It's just about a feeling of not wanting anything else, feeling totally satisfied, when even words are an intrusion," Martin told MTV in 1990 when asked about *Enjoy The Silence*. "You just don't need anything else." The track was the second single from *Violator*, and went Top 10 both in the UK and the States and won the band a Brit in 1991. The final version was very different to the original demo; this appears to have happened a lot with many *Violator* songs, but in this case it was the most dramatic change of all. "Strangely, the thing that came to mind was that I could hear Neil Tennant singing it in my head," Wilder says of his first listen of the original demo. "Something about the line 'All I ever wanted' sounded very Pet Shop Boys to me."

7 POLICY OF TRUTH

The third, and some would say best, single from *Violator* landed Depeche Mode another Top 20 hit in both the States and the UK. Again, it's classic Mode with singalong verses and a chorus to get any 70,000-strong stadium going. The only thing that lets it down is the rather screeching sound that follows the "the time before" lyric at around two minutes.

8 BLUE DRESS/ INTERLUDE #3

Blue Dress is Gore at his stalking best, a song about him simply watching someone get dressed, but don't get too caught up in thoughts of Martin doing this – *Blue Dress* is an exceptional track. It marries guitar riffs and electronics perfectly and builds through layers of strings and class, all the time underpinned and undermined by a sleazy, cat-like synth and some rather terrifying, perverted cackling at its close before it drifts into another interlude on the album.

9 CLEAN

The fact that *Clean* was chosen to close the album shows the strength and depth of *Violator*. It opens like a great stomping track from any previous Mode album, but when those tearing strings come in at around three minutes, the hairs on your arms will stand up. You can't ignore the irony of the lyrics, either; Gahan might have been the "cleanest I've been" during the recording of this, but little did he know he would one day be so immersed in drug addiction that it would kill him – albeit for just two minutes.

happens when important moments take place and things begin to unravel. Depeche's fans argue endlessly as to the merits or otherwise of everything the band produces, yet none will begrudge *Violator*'s pivotal role in the their evolution and the impression that it left."

Wilder would leave the band after *SOFAD*, but his reasons perhaps stem back from those earlier sessions working with Flood. "The simple answer is I'd just had enough of being in the group and felt I couldn't really do much more," he told this author in 1997. "There were difficulties and communication breakdowns. I think most of the detailed work was too boring for the other members of the group, so they tended to disappear and allow me and Flood to get on with it."

Since then, of course, Gahan has once again become the cleanest he's been, and Depeche Mode have released several further albums. However, none have matched *Violator*. It really was the sound of a band on fire and form, and one that worked as a unit in its most creative phase of the last four decades. ■

THE BIG PICTURE

THE VIDEOS

PERSONAL JESUS

This was the first colour-ish video of the band from director Anton Corbijn. *Personal Jesus* finds the Mode on a ranch in Almería in Spain, tempted by a bevy of beautiful women. Is the ranch really a brothel? MTV were so appalled by this insinuation that they elected to edit out some of Martin Gore's more suggestive mouth movements. It's all tongue in cheek, though, as the boys can be found on rocking horses and generally larking around. **youtu.be/u1xrNaTO1bI**

ENJOY THE SILENCE

The iconic video for *Enjoy The Silence* video split the Depeche Mode community, with some fans citing it as cheesy. "We did it in Portugal, in the Swiss Alps, Scotland and London," Dave Gahan told MTV in 1990. "It took about a week, mainly me walking around with a king's outfit on which I hated, but was convinced by everyone it would be okay, but I still think I look a prat in it... The only thing the band did were two hours in London, looking moody." **youtu.be/aGSKrC7dGcY**

POLICY OF TRUTH

The original song riffs on the theme of keeping a part of yourself hidden from others, and this Corbijn collaboration illustrates this perfectly. DM are shot individually throughout – partnered at first and then singled out as various images flash behind them. Martin Gore is caged by a wire fence and Gahan is prowling a red-light district in his car. The video is mostly shot in shadow and is very grainy, with flashes of harsh light occasionally beamed onto the band. **youtu.be/M2VBmHOYpV8**

WORLD IN MY EYES

There are two versions of this Corbijn-directed video. The first aired on TV and features Gahan entertaining a girl at a drive-in while watching the World Violation Tour concert film on screen. The second version was shot for the *Strange Too* VHS release. They are basically the same, although the newer video shows the entire band in the car at the drive-in, has a lot more abstract concert footage edited into it and a much longer, silent Gahan ending. **youtu.be/yPYZpwSpKmA**

Recent projects from electronic music trailblazer Giorgio Moroder include a soundtrack for the video game *Tron RUN/r*, also remixed by many Warp artists

© Anna Maria Zunino Noellert

GODFATHERS of POP

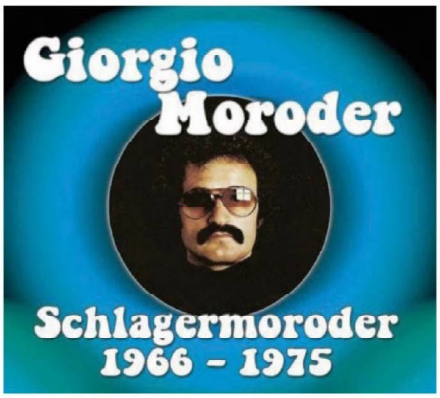
GIORGIO MORODER

Legendary Italian producer Giorgio Moroder single-handedly invented disco when he drenched Donna Summer's dulcet tones with a pulsating synthesiser on her 70s hits *Love To Love You Baby* and *I Feel Love*. He went on to dominate the pop airwaves with chart smashes for an array of artists, ranging from Phil Oakey and Irene Cara to Blondie and Japan, as well as recording a stream of massive movie soundtracks, including *American Gigolo*, *Midnight Express* and *Scarface*. He resurfaced in terms of the mainstream music-buying public when his biography was turned into a song by French electro-pop duo Daft Punk in 2013. The moustache may have greyed, but he remains as passionate about electronic pop music as ever…

Things were quiet on the Giorgio Moroder front until Daft Punk suddenly came along and asked you to work with them...
Yes, I was happily retired. I moved to Europe and was spending a lot of time in Paris. I hadn't had any interesting proposals but, then again, I was afraid of receiving any, because it would have meant getting back to work! But now, thanks to Daft Punk, I'm officially back on the workforce.

If they ever wanted to take you on tour, would you go?
If they asked me, I would go immediately – they are so incredible.

You told part of your life story in their track *Giorgio By Moroder* on the album *Random Access Memories*. Were you not tempted to use your signature robot-effect vocoder for it?
No, I leave that kind of thing to them. Actually, I didn't have any idea at all what they would do with my voice… I just spoke for three hours, and a year later, I still hadn't been allowed to hear the song – that's the amount of secrecy they maintained. The way they use the vocoder is beautiful, too. It takes them days and days to find the right sound; those guys are real perfectionists.



By the sound of your records, you surely must be something of a perfectionist too...
Not so much. I don't care if there are mistakes. The old synthesisers were often out of tune. In [Berlin's] *Take My Breath Away*, I lost the bass sound, so the final song was something that I played myself – and I'm not a very good bass player. Also, on *Love To Love You Baby*, if you solo the bass, it's terrible. When we did the longer version, the bass player learned the song better. So the bass in the second part is a big improvement.

Your extended version of *Love To Love You Baby* effectively became the first 12" dance record. How did it happen in the first place?
[Casablanca Records boss] Neil Bogart telephoned me at 3am and asked me to extend the song for a party at his house, because people wanted to hear it over and over again. That was the key to it becoming a hit, I think. I repeated the idea many times; it's an interesting thing to have a song move through different styles for 15 minutes or more.

A cool compilation entitled *Schlagermoroder 1966-1975* came out in 2013, featuring a lot of your earliest material...
Some of it's interesting. I heard one great bubblegum song that I still like, called *Looky, Looky*, which was an early hit in Europe. But the one that's most significant is *Son Of My Father*, where I used a synthesiser for the first time.

Your music has been used for a lot of movies. Do you have a personal favourite?
I was pleased that Quentin Tarantino used *Cat People* for his film *Inglourious Basterds*. That was a great moment, and it was perfect for the scene where the girl gets ready to kill the Nazi.

What you were doing in the 70s is still being repeated today, but in people's bedrooms rather than professional studios...
Yes, with technology today it's so easy to do a dance song. Everyone is doing it, so everything sounds the same. That was what was so nice about working with Daft Punk. They thought, "Let's go back to the basics and do the tracks as songs – verse, chorus, bridge." I'm also working with two major guys now and they're doing the same. They don't want typical dance songs, which are just eight bars chopped up. The whole electronic dance music thing is coming back to a more traditional way.
Rudy Bolly

● **Georgio Moroder sets off on Celebration Of The 80s – his first-ever European tour – on April 1st 2019, with five dates in the UK and Ireland and 10 more on the continent**

BEYOND THE BLUE HORIZON

ANYTHING GOES AS SYNTH-POP AND INDIETRONICA RETURN TO PROMINENCE AT THE START OF THE MILLENIUM AFTER A QUIET 1990S. HAD IT EVER REALLY GONE AWAY? **IAN RAVENDALE**

The onset of the 21st century brought full-scale changes in communication, with the internet, streaming and instant messaging becoming globally commonplace. MTV had given many different musical genres a platform; trance merged with hard house, while chill out became mainstream and was used in film and television soundtracks, commercials and radio programming. Disco house and funky house, left over from the 90s, metamorphosed into electro house. Hip hop confounded its many critics by not fizzling out and becoming an accepted part of pop.

All had their roots in synth-pop and indietronica to varying degrees. Phil Oakey's famous 1980 quote about all pop music soon being made "synthetically" had become eerily accurate. Mainstream pop acts like Rihanna, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera would probably have been successful in most eras; the main difference is that in the 2000s production techniques grew and developed, with most pop records now being assembled rather than played, thus shaping and influencing the songs themselves. Madonna, the great opportunist, has been able to artfully and subtly craft her records to fit right in alongside those of her younger contemporaries by working with talented producers like Timbaland, Pharrell Williams, William Orbit, Mirwais Ahmadza, Diplo and Avicii, alongside newer talents.

In the 1980s synth-pop acts The Human League, Depeche Mode, Howard Jones and Soft Cell all had runs of hits, but by the 1990s they had been eclipsed by the more earthy grunge bands. The unstoppable rise of new digital technology had brought synth-pop back into the frame once more… but most pop music consumers hadn't noticed. Because of the cost of electronic equipment, musicians starting out had previously been limited to budget kit. By the early 2000s, the number of songwriters, producers and artists had grown exponentially thanks to the convenience of software for home recording, affordable polyphonic synthesisers and the rise of MIDI, aka Musical Instrument Digital Interface. This connects devices that make and control sound – such as synthesisers, samplers, and computers – so that they can communicate with each other. The arrival of MIDI allowed every would-be producer, songwriter and artist to be the next George Martin, Trevor Horn or Nile Rodgers for just a few thousand pounds.

TRANCE MERGED WITH HARD HOUSE, CHILL OUT WENT MAINSTREAM, DISCO HOUSE AND FUNKY HOUSE METAMORPHOSED INTO ELECTRO HOUSE – AND ALL HAD THEIR ROOTS IN SYNTH-POP AND INDIETRONICA

HUMAN NATURE

Las Vegas act The Killers have achieved great mainstream success by combining synth-pop with rock and are one of the planet's biggest bands, playing sell-out concerts internationally. From their debut *Hot Fuss*, all five Killers albums topped the UK chart and appeared in the year-end charts all the way from 2004 to 2009. *Human*, the lead single from 2008's *Day And Age* album, topped Spotify's 2008 global streaming chart. Vocalist Brandon Flowers acknowledged the debt The Killers owed to UK synth-pop by describing *Human* as "Johnny Cash meets the Pet Shop Boys". They're not without their critics: the line "Are we human, or are we dancer" (or is it dancers, or denser?) was nominated as having the most confusing lyric of all time, beating The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus*. "I say that it's a mild social statement,

The Killers' frontman Brandon Flowers spent his formative years in synth-pop band Blush Response

© Everynight Images / Alamy Stock Photo

THE PLAYERS

ARTISTS WHO HELPED SHAPE THE SYNTH SOUND OF THE NOUGHTIES...

GOLDFRAPP

Formed by Alision Goldfrapp and Will Gregory just before the turn of the millennium, Goldfrapp aired their hazy cinematic sounds (or 'a bit arty' as Alison would have it) via grandiose debut album *Felt Mountain* released on Mute in September 2000, and found immediate favour with a coveted Mercury Music Prize nomination. By 2003's *Black Cherry* they must have tired a little of chilling out and turned to glam rock for inspiration, launching their sexed-up stomp *Strict Machine*. Up next, 2008's *Supernature* followed suit with the flashy T-Rex-aping electro-pop of Top 5 hit *Ooh La La*.

LADYTRON

Named after a Roxy Music song, Liverpool-based foursome Ladytron exhibited their fondness for synthesisers via four critically-acclaimed albums in the noughties and – with Hot Chip and a few others – maintained the UK's synth-pop vanguard throughout the decade. Second album *Light & Magic* spawned electro gems *Seventeen* and *Blue Jeans*, while 2005's *Witching Hour* birthed killer single *Destroy Everything You Touch*.

ROBYN

Her 1995 debut album *Robyn Is Here* – co-written by songwriting team Ghost – installed Robyn as Sweden's brightest hope, thanks to a succession of soulful urban-pop hits. But it was her eponymous fourth collection, released smack bang in the middle of the decade, that traded those hip hop-lite grooves for a fresh synth-pop direction that quickly won her a Grammy nomination and a No.1 UK hit in *With Every Heartbeat*.

and that's all I'm gonna say," was Brandon Flowers' response. He did, however, go on to explain that the line was inspired by a Hunter S Thompson quote where the journalist opinioned that America was raising "a generation of dancers".

Freedom of production allowed synth-led acts such as the US's The Postal Service, Broadcast from the UK, and Justice, who hailed from France, to strike out and make their mark... often in unconventional ways. The Postal Service comprised Death Cab For Cutie vocalist Ben Gibbard and electronic music artist Jimmy Tamborello. *Give It Up*, their 2003 (and so far only) album was put together – literally – via the US Mail, with the pair posting CDs with their contributions backwards and forwards to each other. Rilo Kiley vocalist Jenny Lewis joined in and mailed her backing vocals, most notably on *Nothing Better*, a track that nods at The Human League's *Don't You Want Me*. *Give It Up* was voted No.86 in *Rolling Stone* magazine's Top 100 albums of the 2000s.

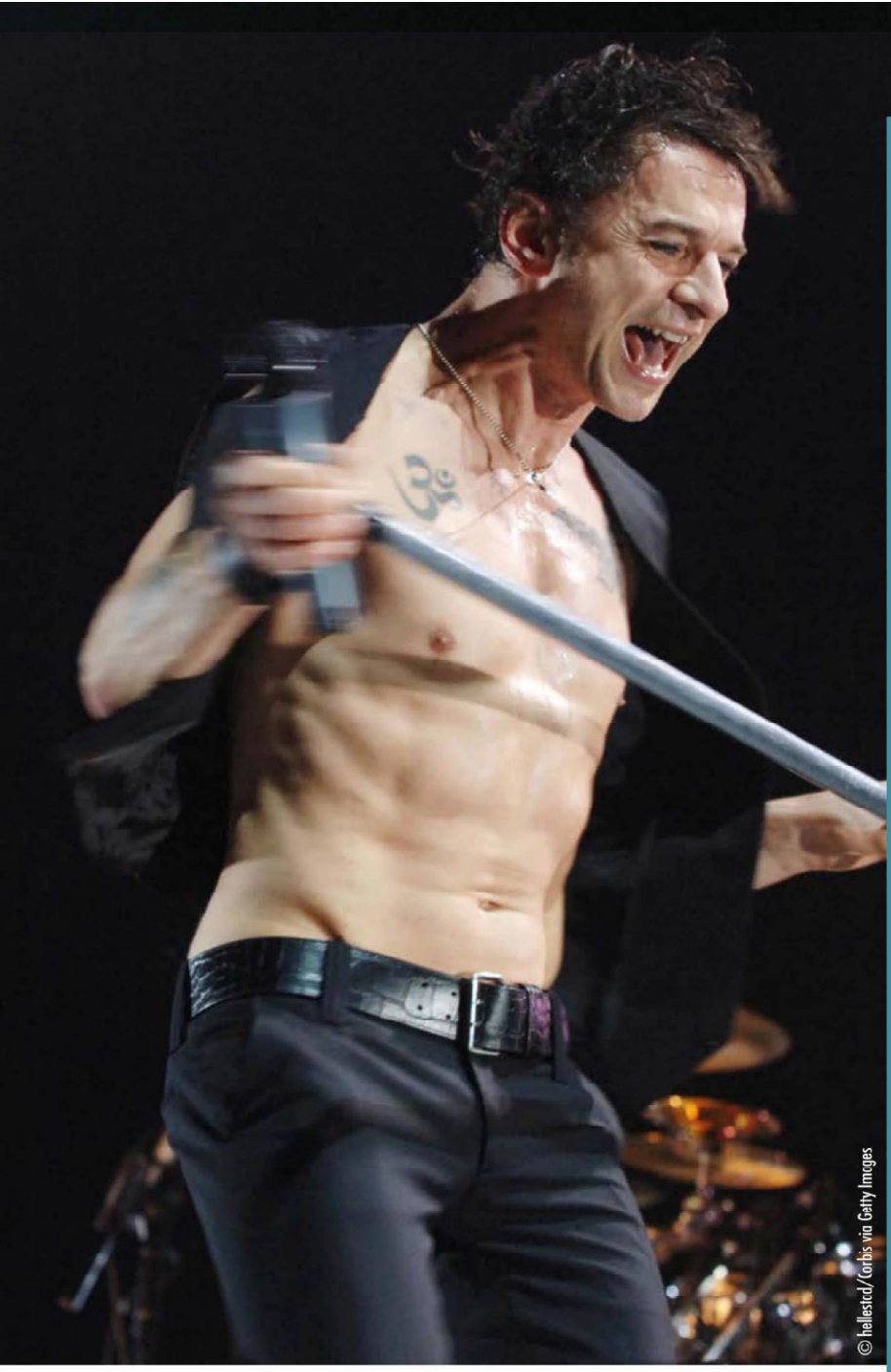
Amazingly, early on in the band's career the actual US Postal Service threatened legal action over the use of the name. This was averted and the group was allowed the use of the 'Postal Service' trademark in exchange for supplying promotional efforts on behalf of the USPS (and by giving a performance at the posties' National Executive Conference). In return, the USPS website offered to sell the band's CDs. *Give It Up* sold a million copies and rumours of a second Postal Service album swirled around for most of the rest of the 2000'. The album's 10th anniversary in 2013 was celebrated by a re-issue of *Give It Up* with two new songs and ten re-mixes backed up by a tour. After which the outfit announced they were disbanding... permanently.

The equally idiosyncratic Broadcast were formed in Birmingham in 1995 by bass player James Cargill and vocalist/guitarist/keyboard player Trish Keenan.

Keenan had been in a 60s folk-influenced duo called Hayward Winters, and had met Cargill at a psychedelic revival club. The duo began as a folk act, added a guitarist, drummer and keyboard player and re-convened as Broadcast, a band heavily influenced by 1960s US female-fronted psychedelic combo The United States Of America. Synth-pop samples were combined with Keenan's wistful vocals, making Broadcast sound like no other contemporary band.

Broadcast were signed to Warp, the Sheffield-based indietronica label who released several EPs and singles by the band along with three albums that started with *The Noise Made By People*. In 2009 Broadcast collaborated with Julian House, the designer and musician who created their distinctive album artwork, to make the unsettling mini-album *Broadcast & The Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults Of The Radio Age*. Sounding like a contemporary version of a Hammer horror film soundtrack, the release was an underground hit and voted Album Of The Year by *The Wire* magazine.

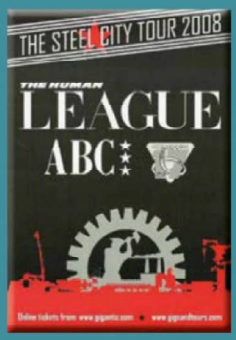
Tragically, Broadcast's career was abruptly cut short in 2011 when Trish Keenan was struck down with the H1N1 strand of pneumonia which she had picked up during an Australian Broadcast tour. Following her death James Cargill carried on working on a final Broadcast album over Trish's demos. The album has yet to be released.



Dave Gahan of Depeche Mode at Wembley in 2006 during the band's massive Touring The Angel outing

GOING LIVE

MANY SYNTH-POP PIONEERS ARE STILL TAKING THE CLASSICS TO THE PEOPLE IN REAL TIME...



There's still a large appetite for live synth-pop among fans, and many of the 'classic' bands tour on a regular basis. Depeche Mode are still one of the planet's biggest attractions, and on their most recent tour they played 150 shows worldwide. In August and September 2008 The Human League headlined the US Regeneration tour, supported by ABC, A Flock Of Seagulls, Naked Eyes and (on some shows) Belinda Carlisle. This was followed by The Steel City Tour with what for many was the dream synth-pop line-up; The Human League, Heaven 17 and ABC. The three bands scooted around UK arenas and civic halls for five shows, climaxing in a home gig at Sheffield Arena.

However, The Steel City Tour took place 10 years ago and is unlikely to ever be repeated by that combination of bands, as Heaven 17's Martyn Ware confirms: "That's never gonna happen again, by the way. Nothing to do with ABC! Phil went off-radar about seven or eight years ago and I haven't spoken to him since then. We remembered how much we loved being in each other's company and how our developmental years were spent together and how significant that was for us. We'll leave it to the good memories."

In addition to lecturing, producing and running the Illustrious Company "to create new forms of spatialised sound composition using a unique 3D AudioScape surround sound system", Martin Ware still occasionally tours with vocalist Glenn Gregory as Heaven 17 (co-founder Ian Craig Marsh left in 2008 prior to the Steel City Tour to take a degree in psychology). This summer Heaven 17 are playing festivals, and there's a 27-date tour supporting Squeeze coming later in the year. "We're on form at the moment," says Ware. "Our last tour sold out for the first time ever. To describe our success... we should call it slow viral!"

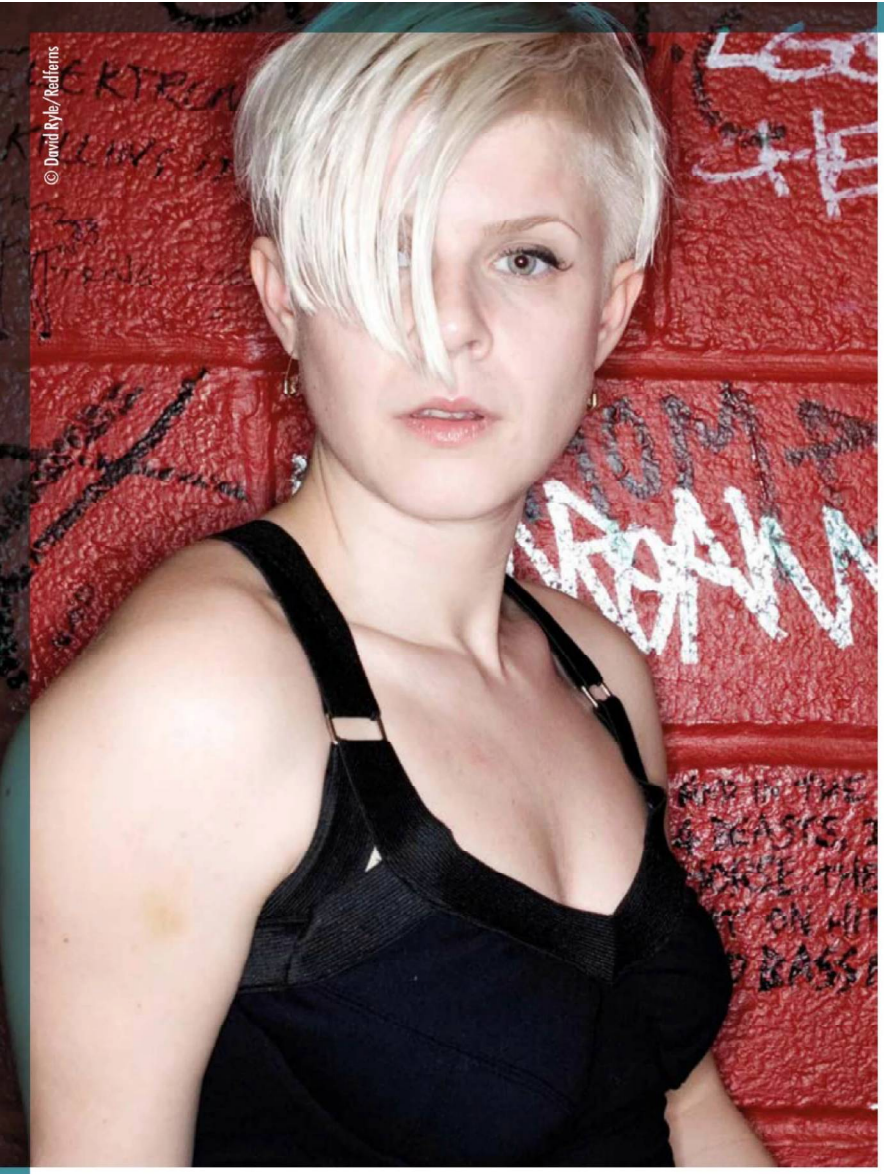
BEYOND THE RULEBOOK

Iain Cook and Martin Doherty met in the early 2000s while attending the Applied Music Course at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Cook was a member of the alternative rock band Aerogramme, but the duo starting working together on a very different project which eventually became the synth-pop band Chvrches. Says Doherty: "Things happened faster and were more exciting and more electrifying. I can look back now and see that there was a unique chemistry. The excitement was coming from the combination of the people who were working on the music and the type of music we were making. More than anything else it was listening to what we'd done after a day in the studio and thinking 'I've never done anything this good before. With anyone'."

Continues Cook: "We'd been in guitar bands, but around this time I was thinking about buying some electronic instruments. I was getting fascinated by the sounds of old synths and modern 'old' synths. It was what we had lying around, and we wanted to try something new that was outside our comfort zone. The musical direction evolved without us talking about it. It was; 'I like the sound of that, I like the sound of this, let's try that'. It was felt, rather than discussed."

"The type of music we ended up making was when you took away all the constraints of 'Is this an indie band? Is this post rock, is this...?' Doherty remembers, adding: "All those bands are bound by a number of rules. When we hit the studio the only thing we kept saying was 'No rules!' Just let fun, and personality, and taste dictate where this goes. And that's how we ended up with our sound."

With the addition of vocalist Lauren Mayberry, the project became Chvrches in 2013. Admits Doherty: "We got a lot of the less useable stuff out before we started working with Lauren. She helped focus what we were doing as soon as we heard her voice."



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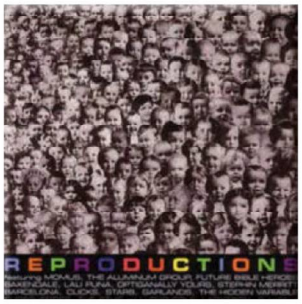
Above: Robyn. Below: New Order's *Waiting For The Sirens' Call* and 2000's *Reproductions* Human League tribute album



Chvrches were soon being compared to 80s synth bands. "We grew up listening to that music. It was a golden era of pop," Iain said. "We're not a backwards-looking band. I don't think our music sounds like it could have come from the 80s. It sounds modern. There are elements that hark back to the 80s and that stuff pops its head up once in a while, but I don't think we're a retro-throwback band!"

Robin Miriam Carlsson – otherwise known as Robyn – started her career as a major-label teenage R&B singer in Sweden in the 90s. After 10 years with BMG she re-emerged in 2005 with a new synth-pop sound on Konichiwa, her own independent label. Konichiwa Records subsequently signed a global licensing deal with Universal to distribute Robyn's music globally, with Island Records releasing her records in the UK. The singer's fourth LP *Robyn*, released in 2005, was her first No.1 album in Sweden. It drew from synth-pop, rap, dance and new age, and won her three 2006 Swedish Grammis Awards for Best Album, Best Writer and Best Pop Female. In 2007, *With Every Heartbeat* was Robyn's first UK No.1 and a US Top 10 club single the following year, picking up airplay on both pop and dance radio stations. She toured as support on the European dates of Madonna's Sticky & Sweet tour in 2008 and won another Grammis award as Best Live Act.

Robyn has released eight albums since 1995 and her influence on synth-pop at an international level is immense, as her friend and collaborator Joseph Mount of UK band Metronomy told *The Guardian*'s Laura Snapes: "There was a point in the 2000s where you started hearing more than one Robyn-style track on every pop person's record". You can certainly hear her in Rihanna's *We Found Love*, Ariana Grande's *Love Me Harder* and Taylor Swift's *Welcome To New York*. Several tracks on *Emotion*, Carly Rae Jepsen's third album – released in 2015 – also bore the Robyn influence, as did a lot of 2017's *Melodrama*, the second studio album by New Zealand's singer Lorde. When Lorde and her co-producer Jack Antonoff performed on the US *Saturday Night Live* programme they made sure a framed photograph of Robyn was in situ on the piano. "Robyn has definitely been part of paving the way for pop stars who fall a little to the left of the Top 40 norm," adds contemporary UK synth-pop star Charli XCX.

NEW OLD ORDER

While newer acts like Robyn and Chvrches have picked up the baton, many of the original synth-pop performers are still around, playing live and recording. Depeche Mode, The Human League, Heaven 17, Howard Jones and Kraftwerk all toured in the 2000s, and to great acclaim.

At the 2009 Brits Pet Shop Boys re-affirmed their position as synth-pop's premier duo, mainly by just being there playing their hits. Chris Lowe has long made apparently doing nothing an art-form and topped it off on this occasion playing homage to one of his main rivals, Duran's Nick Rhodes, in a fluorescent pink wig. Included in the Brits set was *What Have I Done To Deserve This* with Lady Gaga – whose synth-pop style often shows a strong Pet Shop Boys influence – standing in for the late Dusty Springfield. Neil Tennant, cool as a cucumber, didn't introduce Gaga when she walked on and just let her get on with it (as Lady G changes her appearance as often as most people change their socks, some of the audience won't have immediately have twigged who they were seeing).

New Order seemed to be marking time in the 2000's, issuing live albums, compilations and only occasional new work, like 2005's *Waiting For The Sirens' Call*; a falling-out between Peter Hook and Bernard Sumner resulted in Hook leaving the band in 2007. The Human League, meanwhile, continued as a live and recording act based around the trio of Phil Oakey, Susan Sulley and Joanne Catherall, and in 2006 played to an audience of 18,000 at the Hollywood Bowl. 2000's tribute album *Reproductions: Songs Of The Human League* included performances by contemporary synth-pop acts including Ladytron, Lali Puna and Momus, amongst others. Heaven 17 toured the UK in 2018 to celebrate the 35th anniversary of *The Luxury Gap* album and will be supporting Difford and Tilbrook on this year's October and November tour.

The noughties had seen a revival of interest in synth-pop spurred on by both nostalgia and the reduction of the cost of the equipment. Vintage synthesisers and contemporary ones that could be programmed to produce similar sounds and styles were now easily accessible. Electronic dance beats and patterns could be heard in day-to-day pop. Yes, music had once again evolved... ■

Named after a 1972 Roxy Music song, Ladytron formed in Liverpool in 1990

© Wendy Redfern/Redferns

THE HUMAN LEAGUE CONTINUED AS A LIVE AND RECORDING ACT, AND THE 2000 TRIBUTE ALBUM *REPRODUCTIONS: SONGS OF THE HUMAN LEAGUE* INCLUDED PERFORMANCES BY LADYTRON, LALI PUNA AND MOMUS

ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

MUST-HAVE LONG-PLAYERS FROM THE DAWN OF A FRESH MILLENNIUM

ROBYN

ROBYN (2007)

Robyn arrived on the scene in 1995, but this was the album that established her worldwide. Managing to be inventive while referencing many past synth-pop triumphs, *Robyn* debuted at No.1 in the Swedish album chart, peaked at 11 in the UK equivalent and was eventually awarded gold status.

THE POSTAL SERVICE

GIVE UP (2002)

Ben Gibbard's quirky non-Death Cab For Cutie venture with The Postal Service was a one-off dabble into electronica still discussed 17 years later. The catchy songs sound like tapped notes on a Casio sung by someone in their bathroom into a cassette recorder. Result? A masterclass in quirky.

LCD SOUNDSYTEM

SOUND OF SILVER (2007)

A bold experiment in creating electronic music using almost entirely non-digital instrumentation that works surprisingly well. With alternately screamed, spoken and occasionally sung vocals plus thoughtful lyrics, the album has a heavy disco influence with each track drawing the listener in slowly. Dance-rock for grown-up people.

LADYTRON

WITCHING HOUR (2005)

For their third album, the Ladytron trio enlisted producer Jim Abbiss (Sneaker Pimps, Arctic Monkeys, Kasabian, Adele) and promptly transitioned into a band that could swing. Bass lines burble and guitars and drums are fleshed out to create a rich, complex sound where trad instruments interact with electronics.

GOLDFRAPP

SUPERNATURE (2005)

The third album from the London two-piece was brash, danceable and melodically memorable, with Alison Goldfrapp's voice soaring over clever percussion and sparkling synth lines. Mixing electropop, disco, electro-clash and more, *Supernature* sold no less than a million copies and was nominated for a Grammy award.

NEW SYNTH REBELS

THE QUESTION "WHAT IS SYNTH-POP?" HAS BECOME MORE COMPLEX AND NUANCED THROUGHOUT THE PAST DECADE. LUCKILY, WHILE THE MAINSTREAM DEFINITION OF POP MUSIC HAS SHIFTED, IT'S MADE FOR SOME FANTASTIC MUSIC – BOTH IN THE CHARTS AND ON THE FRINGES. DOES SYNTH-POP NOW NEED TO FLOURISH AS OUTSIDER ART? *CLASSIC POP* INVESTIGATES... **JOHN EARLS**

In the same way *Party Fears Two* by The Associates and Spandau Ballet's *Muscleboud* initially don't appear to have much in common, the identity of synth-pop has become stretched again over the past decade. Do artists as different as the dancefloor pulse of LCD Soundsystem and genre-fluid Janelle Monáe qualify as synth-pop? LCD's recent straight-up cover of Heaven 17's *(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* and the robo-pop ethos of Monáe's wondrous *Dirty Computer* album would suggest so.

While the Top 40 singles chart is now dominated by R&B and hip-hop collaborations with EDM producers, is synth-pop still a viable commercial concern? Try asking arena headliners Years & Years, who not only have two keyboardists but also wrote with no less than Neil Tennant on the sessions for their recent album *Palo Santo*.

It's easy to forget now, but so many synth-pop staples which have been part of our lives for 40 years such as *Don't You Want Me*, *Tainted Love* and *West End Girls* were far from obvious hits at the time. Until the mid-1980s, when anyone could have a cheap and fashionable keyboard, synth-pop was the staple of misfits and mavericks, people so obsessed by music that they'd virtually bankrupt themselves just to get access to wildly exotic early synths. It's that spirit which, in 2019, is seeing a new generation of outsiders take the idea of synth-pop forward all over again.

UNTIL THE MID-80s, SYNTH-POP WAS THE STAPLE OF MISFITS AND MAVERICKS. IT'S THAT SPIRIT WHICH, IN 2019, IS SEEING A NEW GENERATION OF OUTSIDERS TAKE THE IDEA OF SYNTH-POP FORWARD ALL OVER AGAIN

Of all the singers dubbed "the new Prince", Janelle Monáe is closest to the title. Yet with her insistence she's really a future android held captive by "The Palace Of The Dogs", how could she not be synth-pop?

Sparks, Kraftwerk, The Human League, Soft Cell, Japan, Gary Numan and the other first wave of synth-pop pioneers were universally eccentric. Christine And The Queens, Hot Chip, Lorde, Empire Of The Sun, Chvrches and the other new wave of artists seem equally wholly incapable of conforming. If bloated prog and simplistic punk were the enemies in the 70s, then the quick-fix lyrical inanity of Tiesto, Marshmello, Clean Bandit and co make them unlikely collaborators for current synth-pop artists, even when genre boundaries are more blurred than ever.

The easiest option for anyone with good knowledge of music tech is to become an EDM producer or DJ. If you're able to sing, it's simple to join the legions of mopey singer-songwriters who have seemingly missed the point about what Amy Winehouse and Adele were out to achieve. Merging those skills in pop music is now a deviant move all over again.

One of the best recent synth-pop albums has come from an initially unheralded source, new trio International Teachers Of Pop. Formed in synth-pop's spiritual home of Sheffield by The Moonlandingz duo

THE PLAYERS

ARTISTS WHO ARE HELPING SHAPE THE SYNTH SOUND OF THE 2010S...

LADY GAGA

Lady Gaga has been a major player in synth-pop this decade as much for what she hasn't done as for the music she has made. Since 2008 debut album *The Fame*, Gaga has seemed happier as a vamping piano balladeer than the futuristic icon from *Poker Face* and *Just Dance*. Her Oscar nod – well-deserved, we must admit – for the remake of Campaign For Real Rock drama *A Star Is Born* suggests bangers to rival *Born This Way* may not be happening any time soon.

JANELLE MONÁE

Since emerging on the underground with mini-album *Metropolis* in 2007, Janelle Monáe has developed her pansexual futurism over three full albums. 2010 brought *The ArchAndroid*, 2013 *The Electric Lady*, both missives from a messianic time-travelling alter-ego in an alter-world, but by 2018's wild *Dirty Computer* it became apparent that this was an artist who was impossible to second-guess. Face it, it's much more fun to just sit back and enjoy the ride.

YEARS & YEARS

A band at the crossroads, the trio's debut *Communion* was a celebratory synth-pop gem, cluster-ticking all the boxes by being alternately danceable, balladic and anthemic. Follow-up *Palo Santo* was expertly steered with some knowing collaborators behind the scenes, and undoubtedly special in parts, but it was particularly personal for singer Olly Alexander, with instrumentalists Mikey Goldsworthy and Emre Türkmen having no input on its writing.

MAX MARTIN

With Richard X and Xenomania mysteriously out of favour, it's been left to the Swede to claim back his title as the decade's biggest producer. After scooping the names of virtually every huge, huge star into his address book – we needn't name them here – he could long have since coasted into Diane Warren-style by-rote songwriting and trousered the proceeds, but instead can be relied on to come up with at least one massive tune a year. Behold *Shake It Off, Roar, God Is A Woman*...

CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS

© Jamie Morgan

At her best, Héloïse Letissier is the perfect distillation of everything great about Gallic pop, from the single-mindedness of Jacques Brel to the escapism of Daft Punk. She knows her music past keenly, too, with even her earliest sonic and iconic influences spanning everything from glam stars (Bowie, Bolan), to punk heroines (Patti Smith), assorted Jacksons (Michael, Janet) and the odd minimally-minded composer (Philip Glass, naturally). She's so entertaining and beguiling in concert, it's almost rude to point out that second album *Chris* has a fair few fillers away from its wondrous singles. But we await the next engrossing episode with interest.

© Duncan Stafford

Sheffield's International Teachers Of Pop: "Even Radio 1 has become a nothingness. I want to throw my radio out of the window... it's not what I think of as pop"

Adrian Flanagan and Dean Honer with Flanagan's friend Leonore Wheatley, Flanagan admits the trio's name is jokey in so far as "two guys in their forties making out we're the fountain of pop is daft", but their self-titled debut album has plenty of lessons in songcraft tucked away inside: you're unlikely to hear a better pop song than *After Dark* this year, while *On Repeat* is a masterpiece of office life drudgery from the Heaven 17 playbook.

As self-deprecating as their name is, International Teachers Of Pop are explicit in their despair at what pop music has become. The old adage of "pop is short for popular", previously regularly used by guitar musicians in a slightly nervous defence of their music being described as 'pop', has now become used by dance musicians who reside in the single chart at the expense of traditional pop music. Flanagan is sick of it. "Where does pop exist, other than on Radio 1?" he asks. "And even Radio 1 has become a nothingness. I want to throw my radio out of the window whenever I put Radio 1 on now, as it's not what I think of as pop – all you hear is writing teams who've got together with shoals of producers. It's so manufactured. I don't mind that as such, but there's no colour to the results."

Although Flanagan is pleased electronic music is such a wide genre, he cautions: "It tends to be very boring live. I like bands who put some effort into their shows." He cites the flamboyance of Confidence Man and Audiobooks as the new wave who have the spirit of original synth-pop.

That theatricality in concert is certainly present in Australian duo Empire Of The Sun, whose

"OUR OWN PRESS BIOGRAPHY SAID, 'THERE'S MORE MAKE-UP IN AN EMPIRE OF THE SUN SHOW THAN A L'OREAL CAMPAIGN'. I THOUGHT, 'THIS BAND ISN'T A JOKE. IT'S ABOUT THE MUSIC TOO'"
LUKE STEELE

study of samurai costumes helped influence their spectacular emergence on debut album *Walking On A Dream* in 2008. It's become even more heightened on subsequent albums *Ice On The Dune* and 2016's *Two Vines*, though singer Luke Steele admits he had doubts about how he and instrumentalist Nick Littlemore were being perceived.

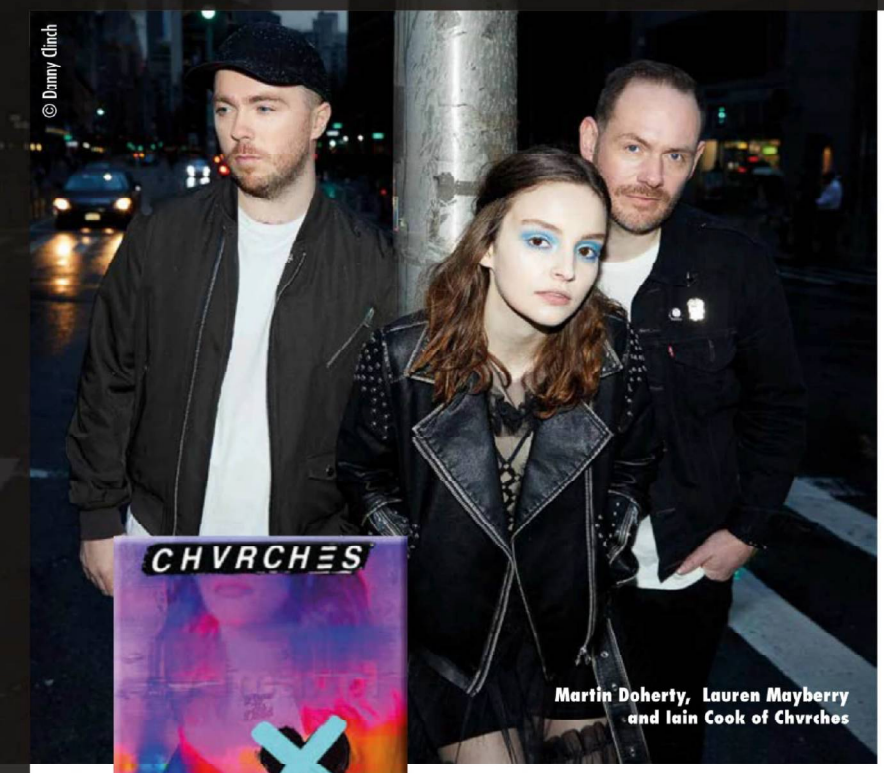
"When we were touring *Ice On The Dune* in 2013, our own press biography said 'There's more make-up in an Empire Of The Sun show than a L'Oreal campaign'," Steele recalls. "I thought, 'This band isn't a joke, we are about the music too.' For a time, I started thinking how we'd be viewed if we didn't wear anything special on stage. But Nick and I have created the look and the characters of Empire Of The Sun, and it's important to ignore what others think to take that as far as you can. *Two Vines* was about the magic of your teenage journeys – first discovering sex, surfing, getting drunk – and you can't do that without being colourful."

There was a five-year gap between Empire Of The Sun's first two albums, and the same long wait for La Roux's second album. After La Roux singer Elly Jackson became one of the best and final stars of the previous decade with 2009's self-titled album, her follow-up *Trouble In Paradise* didn't arrive until 2014, by which time La Roux's shadowy second member Ben Langmaid had left. With Little Boots never quite living up to the promise of her debut 2009 album *Hands*, the first few years of the current decade were in truth somewhat arid for synth-pop. LCD Soundsystem split in 2010 at their peak following third album *This Is Happening*.

Above: Empire Of The Sun are pinned as "theatrical" but *Two Vines* also featured Wendy Melvoin and members of Bowie's last band

Music in general went through a weird time at the start of the current decade, in a cultural shakedown as the 2010s seemingly tried to decide what it wanted to be. Guitar music had flourished in the 2000s too thanks to a wave of hungry bands like The Libertines, Kings Of Leon and The Strokes, but they lost interest and got bloated. The immense Xenomania production line that had powered Girls Aloud and Sugababes seized up. It allowed a wave of lowest-common-denominator EDM to triumph: the list of No.1 singles from the first three years of the 2010s is a very sobering reading indeed.

One of the few commercially worthwhile exceptions from the time were Little Mix. The first group to win *The X-Factor* when they triumphed in 2011, they rejected the show's gloopy formula after having to cover Damien Rice's po-faced ballad *Cannonball* as their debut single, emerging with the slick *DNA* album a year later. While their most recent album *LM5* was a step too far into collab-heavy pop-rap, fourth album *Glory Days* is a marvel of Xenomania-style jugularcentric synth-pop – its lead single *Shout Out To My Ex* has established itself as a wedding party staple, a spiritual answer song to *Don't You Want Me*.



The first seismic sign synth-pop was on the way back came when Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* was No.1 for four weeks in the spring of 2013. Admittedly, it's a universal song you can claim for many genres, but it was a sign people hungered for something fresh. *Get Lucky* was soon followed to No.1 by Lorde's imperious debut *Royals*. The enigmatic New Zealander had seemingly hoovered up everything cool about music from the past 40 years, but her second album *Melodrama* in 2016 is none-more-synth-pop. At a time when Lorde's peers like Taylor Swift and Katy Perry were getting lost in offering up worthy, workmanlike R&B, *Melodrama's* lead single *Green Light* came as a stunning reminder of just how joyful synth-pop can be.

The same year as Lorde emerged, Chvrches appeared as the trio graduated from their past in lo-fi indie to embrace synth-pop's more fun and hedonistic appeal on their gold-selling debut album *The Bones Of What You Believe*. By the time of their punchy third album *Love Is Dead*, the Scots – singer Lauren Mayberry and instrumentalists Iain Cook and Martin Doherty – were so deep in synth-pop's fabric that they persuaded Dave Stewart to produce its first sessions. "Dave was like Mr Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*," laughs Cook. "He took Lauren aside at one point in the first session and told her: 'I see what you're trying to do. You're trying to be a punk rock Joan Of Arc figure, so why don't you just f***ing do it already?' Lauren's initial reaction was tempered on reflection, and she eventually said: 'You know what? He's right…' And Dave introduced us to his signature vodka martini, which ended most of our working days."

As successful as Chvrches' albums and tours have been, only their debut single *The Mother We Share* has reached the Top 50, making No.38. They're not the only ones. *Green Light* is Lorde's sole Top 20 hit since *Royals*. No.20 hit *Tilted* is Christine And The Queens' only Top 75 single. Janelle Monáe's Top 75 history is *Make Me Feel*'s single week at No.74. Hot Chip haven't been in the Top 100 this decade. There's a wider debate to be had about what constitutes a pop star any more: the functional Jess Glynne has the record for most No.1 singles

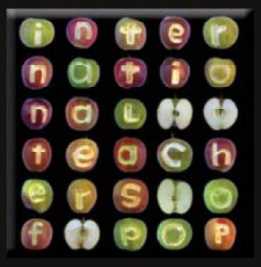
ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

STRANGE TIMES CALL FOR EXTRAORDINARY MUSIC. AND IT'S OUT THERE…

EMPIRE OF THE SUN

ICE ON THE DUNE (2013)

If you look like you're fresh from conquering a neighbouring galaxy, you'd better not make ordinary music. Luke Steele and Nick Littlemore have refused to be anything less than stratospheric as evidenced by their grandiose, euphoria-heavy follow-up to 2008's equally filmic *Walking On A Dream*.



INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS OF POP

INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS OF POP (2019)

The best "Have you forgotten how AMAMZING no-messing synth-pop is?" album you could wish for. It's fitting, then, that analogue-loving trio ITOP hail from UK synth-pop's ground zero, Sheffield. This deserves to be at No.1 for at least as long as *The Greatest Showman* soundtrack.

CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS

CHALEUR HUMAINE (2014)

The arrival of a transcendent pop star who has important things to say, and delivers her message in ever-more colourful ways. French singer-songwriter Héloïse Letissier's *Chaleur Humaine* ('Human Warmth') made the Top Albums Of The Year lists thanks to its electronic – and human – warmth.

JAIN

ZANAKA (2015)

Another Gallic bright spark to appear on pop's horizon this decade, Jain appeared to be Grace Jones by way of *Transformers*, and sounded that way too. The single *Makeba* – written in her teens – is possibly the earworm of the decade, and its parent album *Zanaka* drills even deeper down into the cranium.

YEARS & YEARS

COMMUNION (2015)

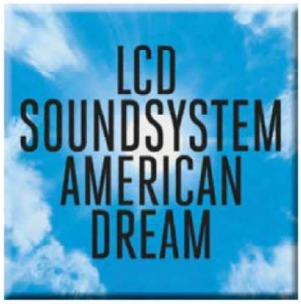
With an anthemic, sky-scraping debut album such as this, the UK's 'most likely to' slot was theirs for the taking. Years & Years' ascending follow-up *Palo Santo* maintains the magic, ensuring they become properly huge while rightly refusing to compromise. Erasure's spiritual heirs are here – and they're fantastic.

by any British solo woman after *I'll Be There* became her seventh chart-topper in June 2018. Glynne is nobody's idea of a colourful pop star, especially next to the hyper-real entertainment provided by Monáe, Lorde, Christine and co. While they're artists with a vision, Glynne and her team know how the mechanics of what works on streaming sites: how many seconds before the vocal kicks in, when the chorus has to happen, the key words to use in lyrics. Idealistic musicians who say "It's impossible to know the formula of what makes a hit single" haven't seen the distressingly clinical rubrics listing the ground rules of getting noticed on Spotify and Apple Music, and the percentage of recent hits which conform to them.

One of synth-pop's few hit singles acts this decade are Years & Years, who made No.1 with *King* and No.2 with follow-up *Shine* in 2015. Debut album *Communion* also went platinum. While the trio have worked with hit factory producers Greg Kurstin and Kid Harpoon, they've mainly used the same close-knit team of Usher/Plan B producer Mark Ralph and Two Inch Punch, who has also worked with Sam Smith and Rag 'N Bone Man. "Your first idea is your best one and I've learned to trust my instincts," says singer Olly Alexander. "It's good to collaborate with the best people in your field, and a great collaborator understands how to facilitate an artist's own sound. We can write and produce ourselves, but it's good to pick other people's brains too."

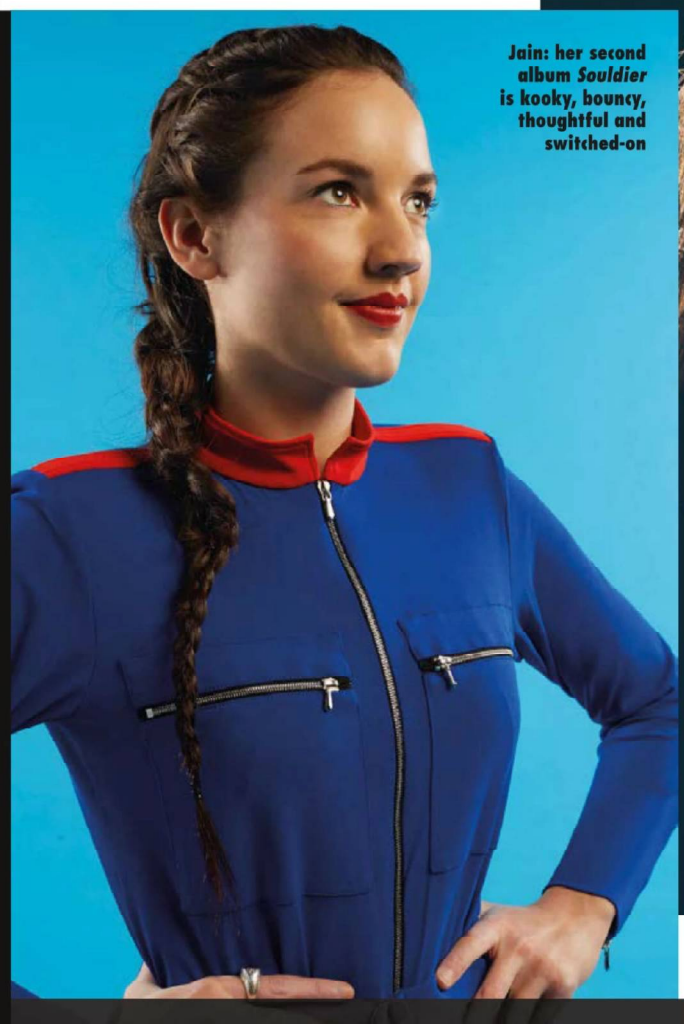
Years & Years have made it work for themselves, but it's the outsiders who now flourish. At least they've been rejoined by some veterans. After Peter Hook left, New Order's response in 2015 was *Music: Complete*, their best dancefloor record since *Technique* 26 years earlier. Pet Shop Boys' double-whammy of *Electric* and *Super* was a thrilling rejection of any notion they might settle for cosiness. Even LCD Soundsystem reformed with 2018's moving *American Dream*. In the wake of first Daft Punk, then Christine And The Queens, French synth-pop is in robust shape: Grammy nominee Jain makes Empire Of The Sun look positively drab with her stage outfits. "I want to play the character of Jain on stage," she says. "I have to dress up. It shows respect for the audience."

If the 2010s has so far been a turbulent ride for synth-pop, the genre ends the decade in rude health. Let's see which maverick will be next to force the mainstream to cede to their will... ■



Lorde: "The enigmatic New Zealander had seemingly hoovered up everything cool about music from the last 40 years"

© Andrew Whitton



Jain: her second album *Souldier* is kooky, bouncy, thoughtful and switched-on

LONG LIVE VINYL

DESIGN-SAVVY SLEEVES, FUTURISTIC AVANT-GARDE SOUNDSCAPES AND A RAPID EVOLUTION – SYNTH-POP WAS MADE TO BE APPRECIATED ON VINYL. HERE, WE SINGLE OUT JUST A FEW CHOICE DISCOVERIES, FROM ALL-EMBRACING BOX SETS AND RECORD STORE DAY RARITIES TO VINYL ARTEFACTS DATING BACK TO THE BIRTH OF THE SCENE… AND A FEW CURIOS FOR GOOD MEASURE

RIK FLYNN

FOUR PIECES: A YAZOO COMPENDIUM

35 years on from Vince Clarke and Alison Moyet's brief tenure at the top comes this handsome 4LP Yazoo box set, out later this year. Housed within a deluxe hardcover book are both Mute albums (*Upstairs At Eric's* and *You And Me Both*), a remix LP that compiles reworkings by bootleg hero Richard X, New York house legend Todd Terry and more, and a final record featuring previously unreleased John Peel and David Jensen Radio 1 sessions from 1982. The set comes with four art prints, 50 of which are randomly signed by Vince and Alison, a double-sided poster and six pocket-sized photos. All tracks are exclusively remastered and presented on 180g black vinyl.

SOFT CELL MUTANT MOMENTS EP

Utterly raw, wildly expressive and muddled together on a two-track recorder with £2000 borrowed from Dave Ball's mum, Soft Cell's opening statement, 1980's 7" *Mutant Moments* EP, features four lo-fi examples of early synth-pop and was released on their own Big Frock Records. Of the four tracks, *Frustration* is the only one to make it onto their *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* LP, but don't let that put you off – this is an important record from an iconic duo. After all, it was this release that led to a placement on the infamous Some Bizzare Records sampler and on to stardom. This EP was limited to 2000 copies and valuations differa great deal, but ones in good condition with the original free postcard fetch the money.

BLANCMANGE IRENE & MAVIS EP

Another of the oldest records to emerge from the early days of synth Britannia, Blancmange's excellently-named *Irene & Mavis* debut 7" EP is – in all honesty – a challenging listen. The experimental synthscapes here bear no resemblance whatsoever to the chart-happy sounds of later successes, but if you indulge yourself in its charms, it's strangely beguiling. Our choice cuts include the bleak yet filmic electronic odysseys *Holiday Camp* and *Just Another Spectre*, while the chattering (and complete and utter weirdness) of *Concentration Baby* is a must-listen. Originals are not easy to come by, and though the sleeve tells fans to "pay no more than 90p for this record", mint copies now sell for well over £100.

SOME BIZZARE LP

While not the most expensive of vinyls in our synth-pop rundown, Some Bizzare's legendary 1982 sampler LP has gone down in history for introducing some of the UK's finest synthesists to the ears of the world, and offers a unique window into the atmosphere at the dawn of the genre. This primal Stevo Pearce-curated LP features Depeche Mode's first recording (*Photographic*), Soft Cell's trashy beginnings (*The Girl With The Patent Leather Face*), early The The (*Untitled*) and Blancmange (*Sad Day*), as well as some cult treasures from B-Movie, Neu Electrikk, Naked Lunch, Illustration and more – all groups who missed the commercial boat. A pristine copy will set you back around £40, while a fair copy can be snatched up for a tenner.

ORGANISATION TONE FLOAT

There are numerous collectibles in Kraftwerk's era-defining catalogue, from the rather tasty *Minimum Maximum* 4LP live box set (£200+) to a hard-to-find pressing of *The Man Machine* LP on red vinyl (£100+) – and we're still after the scarce Vertigo Records *Kraftwerk* double LP reissue with 'spiral' labels – but here, we're going further back in time. Before Kraftwerk were Kraftwerk, founders Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider-Esleben were in avant-garde collective Organisation, and in 1969 they recorded a pioneering electronic album entitled *Tone Float* that is now highly sought after. We've found a few on the market, but it's one for bigger budgets – expect to pay anywhere from £400 to well over £2000 for a mint copy.

NEW ORDER BLUE MONDAY

When Factory Records first issued New Order's infamous electronic volte-face – Fac 73 – with Peter Saville's tear-inducingly expensive, yet utterly timeless 'floppy disc' sleeve with (colour) coded 'typography', no one involved had any idea of its significance. With a mesmeric rhythm track that showcased Tom Oberheim's new DMX drum machine, and inspiration taken from Donna Summer B-side *Our Love*, it would go on to become the biggest-selling 12" of all time. Track down a clean copy of the original iconic pressing – with slick silver inner – and expect to part with over £100. Those with smaller budgets need not worry; cheaper versions – either with no die-cuts or with a grey inner – are available for far less dosh.

PET SHOP BOYS WEST END GIRLS

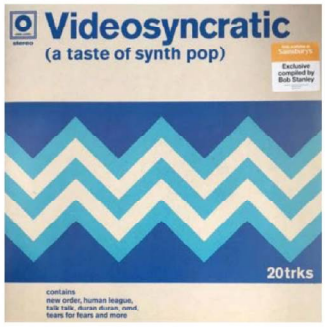
We have multiple versions to explore here. Bobcat Records' original 12" – a double-A with *One More Chance* – was a minor club hit in 1984 and found release in the UK through Epic (around £30). The updated, Stephen Hague-produced hit version (£5) introduced their design partnership with soon-to-be career-long collaborator Mark Farrow, who created an interpretation of the sleeve for the 12" remix version (£15-20). "I just took all the bits I didn't like off it," he explained. For deeper pockets, there's the 1985 10" Collectors Edition (plus bonus 7"), with circular fold-out sleeve and yellow sticker. These vary in value, but £40-50 will bag a still-sealed copy. Take your pick!

PICTURE DISCS

We felt compelled to include a picture disc rundown, and out of the many vibrant examples on our list we've plumped to highlight the following delectable eye-candy: a stunning UK limited edition press of the *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)* LP featuring a fiery-haired Annie Lennox on one side and Dave Stewart on the other (£25 near mint), a cool limited white vinyl pressing of The Human League's *Dare* LP (£20+ near mint), A Flock Of Seagulls' striking *I Ran 7"* with face insignia (about £10), a rare single-sided flexi disc of Telex's *Moskow Diskow* with red flower motif (£50+), a neat 2018 reissue of Bronski Beat's *Age Of Consent* LP (£30+ mint) – plus, our fave, Yello's majestic Stiff Records single *I Love You* with 3-D design (£20+ with 3-D glasses). Phwoar.

RECORD STORE DAY

Record Store Day 2018 brought a few must-haves. Eurythmics' soundtrack LP for the film *1984* arrived on opaque red vinyl (around £40), while Erasure reissued (and remastered) their 1987 2LP remix album *The Two-Ring Circus* on yellow vinyl (£40+). Elsewhere, The Human League offered 2001's *Secrets* on white vinyl (2LP), and Soft Cell released extended versions of *Say Hello Wave Goodbye* and fan favourite *Youth* on double A-sided clear vinyl 12" (£30). The last of our picks from last year is Sparks' previously unreleased *You've Earned The Right To Be A Dick 7"* in the shape of a hippo's head (from the *Hippopotamus* LP sessions) and a limited Yazoo 12" featuring four remixes of *Situation* from legendary French producer François K. Bring on RSD 2019.



VIDEOSYNCRATIC: A TASTE OF SYNTH POP

The absolute last place we'd expect to find a gem of a synth-pop compilation is within the aisles of a supermarket. So when we heard news of this 20-track, double-vinyl collection, issued through Sainsbury's in-house Own Label imprint last year, we stood well and truly corrected – and put one in the trolley immediately. Tastefully curated by St. Etienne's Bob Stanley from the catalogues of Universal and Warner Brothers, this selection ranges from well-spun classics by the likes of The Human League, Visage and OMD to lesser-known gems by Our Daughter's Wedding, B-Movie and Telex. Limited to just 1500 at the time of release, these now appear on the market for around £20-30. A steal.

DEPECHE MODE: THE 12" SINGLES BOX SETS

Depeche Mode always championed the 12" format, and Sony began an artful run of box sets celebrating that very fact in the summer of 2018. Each box is themed around one album and contains all of the singles from that record remastered from the original tapes and cut at Abbey Road. *Speak & Spell* (with repro rare flexi disc) and *A Broken Frame* appeared first with three heavyweight vinyls each; then *Construction Time Again* and *Some Great Reward* arrived, offering six vinyls to replicate the original UK 12s and the limited 12s with their alternate mixes and live tracks. Packaged in deluxe numbered boxes, the sleeves feature replica artwork, and come with repros of the rare original UK marketing posters.

ALPHAVILLE FOREVER YOUNG BOX

Yet another 35th anniversary this year for Alphaville and their debut hit album *Forever Young*. Marian Gold and his troupe of German synth-poppers have chosen to mark their own celebrations with a luxuriously repackaged deluxe edition of the album, remastered for the first time from the original tapes. Added to that are two CDs that compile rarities, B-sides, remixes and 16 intimate pre-album demos recorded between 1983-84, plus there's a DVD containing a documentary about the making of the album (and artwork) and some promo videos. A 24-page vinyl-sized booklet with photos, sleeve notes and more accompanies the set. The box is released in March through Warner Music/Rhino.

THE HUMAN LEAGUE: A VERY BRITISH SYNTHESIZER GROUP

This deluxe triple-vinyl box set chronicles The Human League's singles career, from 1978's *Being Boiled* through to 2011's *Sky*. Their cover of Iggy Pop's *Nightclubbing* appears (from the *Holiday '80* EP), as do *The Sound Of The Crowd* instrumental, extended versions of *(Keep Feeling) Fascination* and 1986's *Human* produced by Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, plus the William Orbit Remix of *Heart Like A Wheel*, all mined from the original 12" singles. Mastered at half-speed for audiophile sound, it comes with a 20-page booklet with an essay by David Buckley (author of *Electric Dreams: The Human League, Heaven 17 And The Sound Of The Steel City*), rare memorabilia, and photographs.

CLASSIC POP MOMENTS

THE SYNTHESISER SHOWDOWN

GRAMMYS 1985

Oh, to be able to venture back in time – and on the evidence of this epic on-stage battle of the synthesisers, the Grammy Awards aren't what they used to be. Orchestrated by producer Ken Ehrlich, 1985's infamous 'Synthesiser Showdown' engaged the vanguard of synthesists – Stevie Wonder, Thomas Dolby, Herbie Hancock *and* Howard Jones – who, after a suitably futuristic robotic introduction, delivered a sizzling medley of their biggest hits surrounded by towering banks of technology, all brought to a climatic denouement via Dolby's questionable conducting skills. And yes, keytars were involved. With synth-pop at its apex, here was a clash of the titans, the likes of which will surely never happen again. **Rik Flynn**

BRONSKI BEAT
THE AGE OF CONSENT
THOMAS DOLBY
The Golden Age of Wireless
EURYTHMICS
DAZZLE SHIPS
OMD
SOFT CELL
Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret
THE HUMAN LEAGUE
REPRODUCTION
THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE
GARY NUMAN
Depeche Mode
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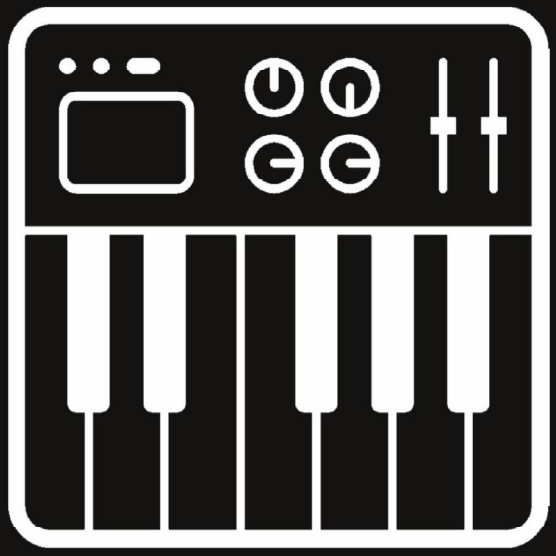

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